

HIV PREVENTION TOOLKIT FOR YOUNG WOMEN

INJECTION DRUGS AND HARM REDUCTION



What is harm reduction?

Harm reduction is about making healthier choices when possible, in order to reduce risk of illness or injury. An example of a general harm reduction practice is using a seat belt in a car.

Some of the harm that stems from drug use is not from the drugs themselves, but from the social, legal and economic factors that shape how drugs are used and how people who use drugs are treated. For example, if someone uses illegal drugs, the steps they take to avoid arrest – like not carrying needles with them – could put them at higher risk for HIV¹ or hepatitis C infection. The stigma associated with drug use can also isolate people from their friends, family, health care providers and social services, which increases their risk of acquiring an HIV infection.

Many factors influence a person's risk of harm from using drugs, including their experiences of stigma, racism, gender discrimination, poverty, childhood trauma and criminalization.

The goal of harm reduction is for people who use drugs to remain as healthy as possible. In the context of drug use, an example of a harm reduction practice is using a needle exchange program.

¹ HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus, a virus that attacks the immune system and results in a chronic, progressive illness which makes people vulnerable to other potentially serious infections and cancers. (AIDS, which stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, is the advanced stage of HIV infection.)

How is HIV related to drug use?

People who use injection drugs are at greater risk for acquiring HIV and hepatitis C infections. This fact sheet focuses on the reasons for this, and offers practical suggestions for reducing the risk. It's important to keep in mind that HIV prevention is just one small part of the harm reduction perspective.

HIV is transmitted through any of these five bodily fluids:

- blood
- breast milk
- semen
- vaginal fluids
- rectal fluids

HIV transmission through sexual activity is most common, followed by transmission resulting from sharing injection drug equipment.

Blood-to-blood contact is one of the most efficient means of transmitting HIV and hepatitis C from one individual to another. For this reason, sharing drug injection equipment is extremely risky for transmission.

Drugs themselves do not transmit HIV – the virus is carried from an infected person's bloodstream to another person's bloodstream through the blood on shared needles or other paraphernalia.

Gender and drug use

HIV transmission rates continue to increase among young women. Those who use drugs tend to be particularly vulnerable to HIV infection, for a variety of reasons:

- ➔ They are more likely to be introduced to injection drugs by a partner, who may provide the drugs and the injection equipment. They are also more likely to be injected by others, rather than injecting themselves. As a result, they have less control over their own injection risks. People who control their own drugs, equipment and injections have more control over their own health and safety.
- ➔ HIV is more prevalent in the injection-drug using community, making it more likely that people who use injection drugs will be exposed to HIV either through sex or through sharing of injection equipment.
- ➔ Many sexually active people who inject drugs also engage in sexual behaviours that increase their risk of HIV infection (e.g. infrequent condom use).

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- ➔ Men often have more economic independence and/or power than people of other genders. Being financially dependent on others can make it more difficult to negotiate boundaries. Taking care of one's own finances can help prevent HIV.
- ➔ Some women and people who identify as trans* may fear losing custody of their children, the roof over their heads, or access to income or drugs if they insist upon safer drug use or safer sex practices.
- ➔ Girls, women and people who identify as trans* are more likely to have experienced sexual abuse or violence in relationships, both of which can be powerful factors influencing their choices to use drugs.
- ➔ Sexual activity and drug use - the most common routes of HIV transmission – tend to be less stigmatizing for men than for other genders. Drug use and HIV may be seen by some people as moral issues rather than as health issues, especially for women. Thus, there may be more judgement and less support for women who use drugs.
- ➔ People who are pregnant or raising children might avoid seeking help for problems related to drug use, HIV, domestic violence or mental health issues, because of stigma or because they fear their children will be taken from them.
- ➔ Involvement in sex work, or the exchange of sex for money, drugs or the necessities of life, can increase exposure to HIV if working conditions are unsafe, or in cases where negotiating boundaries is difficult or impossible.
- ➔ Drug treatment programs tend to be targeted more at men and less at other genders.
- ➔ In many communities, there are no sexual or reproductive health programs for people who use drugs.

HIV prevention for people who use injection drugs

- ➔ HIV and hepatitis C are not transmitted through drugs, but through blood on shared tools and equipment used for injecting drugs. If drug-use equipment is not shared – regardless of who it belongs to – HIV transmission will not occur as a result of injecting drugs.
- ➔ People who use injection drugs should learn how to inject themselves rather than relying on other people to do it for them.
- ➔ It's a good idea to make use of harm reduction programs, such as needle exchange programs and supervised injection sites, in communities where they exist.
- ➔ A sharp, sterile syringe, a clean cooker, fresh water and new cotton is recommended for each injection.
- ➔ When there isn't a new, sterile needle available, one should consider using non-injection methods of consuming drugs, such as snorting or smoking.

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- ➔ If a needle must be re-used, it's much better to re-use one's own needle rather than one that has been used by other people.
- ➔ It is strongly recommended that needles never be shared. However, if sharing is going to occur, it's recommended that the needle be cleaned with bleach and water before re-using it. (Bleach is not effective at reducing hepatitis C infection from syringes, but it can help prevent HIV infection.)
- ➔ Shooting and cleaning water should be kept separate. If water gets contaminated, it will contaminate the rest of the injection materials.
- ➔ Whenever possible, one should try to use in a safe, clean place, which will reduce the pressure to rush or cut corners.
- ➔ People who inject drugs should try to avoid injecting alone. If people have someone with them, they can look out for each other and get help if needed (in case of overdose, for example).
- ➔ If people who inject drugs are sexually active, they should follow the same safer sex practices recommended for everybody (e.g., be aware of their HIV status, use condoms and lube for vaginal and anal sex, use condoms or dental dams for oral sex, get tested regularly and treated promptly for sexually transmitted infections, etc.).
- ➔ Taking care of one's health in general by eating, drinking water and getting enough sleep can indirectly help prevent HIV.
- ➔ PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) might be a good option for some people who inject drugs. It's a daily prescription medication for preventing HIV.

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