

HARM MINIMIZATION: Advice about safer drug use¹

WHERE?

Taking drugs with friends is always safer than doing it alone. If you take too much, then others can get help or keep you safe. In an intoxicated state people can have accidents such as falling into a road or canal. If you can, avoid using drugs in isolated places.

HOW?

It is safer not to inject. Swallowing, smoking or inhaling drugs is safer than injecting, though still not without risks - once you have swallowed or eaten a drug the effects can be delayed for 1-2 hours and may be stronger than you expected.

Injecting drugs directly into veins (mainlining) is the most risky method as there is a greater chance of:

- **OVERDOSE** because the drug enters the bloodstream directly and acts immediately on the brain.
- **INFECTION** Bacteria can enter the body from unsterilised ("dirty") needles, from contaminated heroin and also from your skin or hands. A severe infection can lead to septicaemia (blood poisoning) which can cause death. The signs are high fever, loss of consciousness and a red skin rash. Immediate medical attention is essential. Injecting risks serious infection even if you are very careful with hygiene. Tiny particles of the drug (or substances used to 'cut' the drug) can get lodged in the valves of the heart. This causes a potentially fatal condition called bacterial endocarditis.)
- **ABSCESSSES** may form at the site of injection as a result of bacterial infection.
- **HIV, HEPATITIS B and C.** These viruses can enter the body through contaminated equipment that pierces the skin in any way. They can also be spread by vaginal and anal intercourse without a condom. In addition, hepatitis B and C (but not HIV) can be spread through shared razors and toothbrushes
- **BLOOD CLOTS (thromboses)-** Veins used repeatedly for injection become worn out and the blood fails to drain properly. They harden and look dark under the skin (track marks). This is due to the blood clotting. A clot can break away and get lodged either in the limb causing pain and swelling. If they get lodged in small blood vessels (brain or lungs) they cause a severe, sometimes fatal, condition called an embolism. Veins and arteries, damaged through injecting, can get blocked and cut off blood supply to and from a limb. This results in gangrene. Some people have had to have their limbs amputated because of this.

It is more dangerous to inject in big veins like the groin or neck as they are very close to large arteries and it is easy to hit them instead. This could result in rapid blood loss and death, or blocking blood supply to leg or brain.

IT IS SAFER NOT TO INJECT.

Ways to reduce the risks of injecting

Don't share equipment

Sharing anything to do with injecting carries risks. It isn't just the needle that's dangerous; it's everything used for injecting that could pass on viruses. Avoid sharing needles, syringes, filters, spoons and water. Don't be tempted to use other people's "wash outs". Sterile sealed needles and syringes are the safest option. Sterilising used needles with bleach can be effective in killing Hepatitis B and HIV but not necessarily hepatitis C

Take great care with hygiene

Hygiene is very important when injecting drugs. Make sure your hands and the injection site are clean by washing vigorously and thoroughly with soap and hot water, drying on a clean towel, and cleaning the injection site. NB just because something looks clean doesn't mean it's free from microscopic viruses and bacteria.

Be vaccinated against hepatitis B

Ask to be given hepatitis B vaccine. Whilst it won't prevent you from catching hepatitis C or HIV, it will provide protection from hepatitis B. Talk to a doctor or nurse about high risk behaviours and ways to reduce risk to yourself and those around. Consultations with health care workers are confidential and will not be reported to discipline staff.

Use as little citric acid as possible to dissolve the heroin

A lot of citric acid can damage the muscle or the body under the skin. This damage gives bacteria a better chance to grow.

If you inject more than one type of drug

Inject each at a separate place on your body with clean works for each injection. This is important because certain drugs (eg cocaine) could give bacteria in heroin a better chance to grow.

If you get swelling, redness or pain where you have injected yourself or pus collects under the skin, you should get a doctor to check it out immediately.

If you intend to inject drugs when you are released, advice is available from your local needle and syringe exchange.

SPECIAL RISKS

Mixing drugs

Avoid cocktails of drugs - mixing drugs makes it more difficult to predict what will happen and for how long. Some drugs are slower acting than others eg methadone takes much longer than heroin to reach peak effect, so allow time for a drug to have its effect before using something else. It is also much more difficult medically to treat an overdose if combinations of drugs have been used.

Combining alcohol and drugs is surprisingly risky –Alcohol is a 'depressant'. This means it slows down your breathing (and other bodily functions), especially in high

doses. Heroin, methadone, benzo's and some other drugs have a similar effect on breathing. If you mix alcohol with any of these drugs, there is a real risk that you may stop breathing. You could also vomit and, if semi-conscious, choke on your vomit. Many accidental overdoses and deaths are thought to be due to people mixing drugs, particularly including alcohol.

Remember, less is safer.

A treat after time inside can lead to death

When people use drugs regularly over a long time, they usually find that they need more of the drug to get the same effect. This is known as 'tolerance'. Tolerance increases as more drugs are used. It also decreases when drugs are stopped. A drug-free period (eg prison, rehab) leads to reduced tolerance. Reduced tolerance has been responsible for countless accidental overdoses and deaths after release from prison and rehab. People often look forward to a treat after a spell of abstinence. They make the mistake of thinking that they can use the same amount as before. *Your previous dose is likely to result in overdose, even death.* Spend some time talking with a CARATS worker about temptations on the outside and what situations are likely to trigger a relapse. Have a clear plan in mind of how you could ideally avoid the relapse situation, or make it a safer experience.

If you are tempted to use after release:-

- try a safer way of using rather than injecting - eg smoking.
- try a very small amount first and allow for time for its effects to come on before taking more
- avoid mixing drugs

Intoxication (with any kind of drug and alcohol) can reduce your inhibitions and make you less likely to make safe judgements about risks, less careful and more impulsive. It puts you at greater risk of:

- sharing injecting equipment
- accidents
- unsafe sex
- overdose
- being a victim of crime such as mugged, sexually assaulted, beaten up.

Drugs from an unknown source

Illicit drugs vary considerably in their strength, which may lead to overdose. They may also be mixed with other substances that are toxic.

Be careful (eg take a test before you use your usual amount) when using any drugs that look different from those you are used to. When buying from an unknown dealer or when you know the drugs come from a different source, pay attention to the experiences of your friends.

WHAT TO DO IF SOMEONE OVERDOSES

1. See if they can be roused, by shaking them and calling their name, or by pinching their earlobe.
2. Check if they are breathing by putting your cheek close to their mouth. Even if breathing is shallow you should be able to feel the breath.
3. Turn them **onto their side (not their back)** on the floor and try not to leave them alone (otherwise if they are sick, they may inhale vomit).
4. Ensure that their chin is not slumped onto their windpipe thus blocking their airway. Keep neck and chin up in a comfortable position.
5. Dial 999 **immediately** and ask for an ambulance (if outside prison) or alert staff.
6. Collect any powders, tablets or anything else that may have been used in taking the drug — give them to the ambulance driver. If you know what drugs have been taken, tell the emergency services. This could save a life.
7. If you are aware of other First Aid measures, use them.

If in doubt-ALWAYS GET HELP!

USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

Narcotics Anonymous (NA)

UK Helpline: 020 7730 0009

National Drugs Helpline

0800 776600

Release

0207 603 8654 — 24 hour helpline

Drugs in School Helpline 10 am–6 pm

¹ Adapted, with permission, by Liz Brewer, Dual Diagnosis Trainer, Institute of Psychiatry from: 'Problem Drug Use: a guide to management in general practice' Nottingham Alcohol and Drug Team, The Wells Road Centre, Nottingham, NG3 3AA