

Understanding harm reduction: Substance use

What is harm reduction?

Harm reduction is a public health approach to substance use (including alcohol, cannabis, and other substances) and drug policy. The aim of harm reduction is to support the health and wellbeing of people who use substances. Harm reduction aims to meet people “where they are at”, whether that is active substance use or abstinence.

Harm reduction includes programs and services to lessen the harms related to substance use and drug policy, including blood borne infections, drug poisoning (overdose), criminalization, and stigma. Harm reduction is also an approach to service delivery that prioritizes evidence, human rights and anti-stigma.

Some examples of services available to prevent harms from substance use include:

- Impaired driving prevention programs. These programs increase awareness of the risks of driving under the influence of substances
- Outreach and support programs
- Information and resources on safer ways to use substances, including the use of alcohol, opioids, stimulants and other substances
- Supply distribution and needle recovery programs
- Substance checking services to learn what may be in an illicit drug sample
- Options for opioid substitution (agonist) therapies such as methadone or suboxone

- Take home naloxone kits. The kits include medication to reverse an opioid poisoning. This helps prevent brain injury and death
- Overdose prevention services. These services help prevent drug poisoning (overdose) deaths. They can also connect people to health and social services
- Mental wellness and healing support programs and centres
- Peer support programs run and attended by people who use substances. The programs must receive enough funding for consistent service

What are the benefits of harm reduction related to substance use?

Harm reduction has many benefits for people who use substances. It also helps their families, friends and communities. Research shows harm reduction activities can:

- Reduce stigma
- Increase access to support programs, and health and social services
- Reduce sharing of substance use equipment
- Reduce infections, such as hepatitis C and HIV
- Reduce deaths and harms from drug poisoning and substance use
- Increase knowledge around safer substance use practices
- Increase knowledge around safer sex practices and sexual health

Should I have concerns about harm reduction

Some people express concerns about harm reduction. A common concern is that harm reduction activities encourage people to use substances. Research shows that harm reduction activities do not encourage substance use. In fact, they can encourage people who use substances to protect their health, by screening for problematic substance use and getting treatment for example.

For more information

For more information about harm reduction and naloxone, read the following:

- [HealthLinkBC File #102b Harm reduction for families, caregivers and friends of people who use substances](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #118 Naloxone: Treating opioid overdose](#)
- Ministry of Health and Addictions – Help Starts Here: Harm Reduction <https://helpstartshere.gov.bc.ca/substance-use/harm-reduction>

For more information about overdose recognition, prevention and the Take Home Naloxone (THN) program, visit:

- Toward the Heart <https://towardtheheart.com>
- Toward the Heart – Harm Reduction Best Practices: Needle Distribution at <https://towardtheheart.com/assets/uploads/167570703610qNfHXHfEjtekAcVjCflkzKBLIcqN05yGYuSjF.pdf>



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