

Harm reduction for families, caregivers and friends of people who use substances

What is harm reduction?

Harm reduction is a public health approach to substance use 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 (avoiding the use of substances).

Harm reduction services include non-judgmental and shame-free approaches and services. Examples are:

- Access to safer substance use supplies
- Take home naloxone
- Drug checking services
- Referrals to health and social services
- Policies to decriminalize substance use

For more information on decriminalization, read Government of British Columbia: Decriminalizing people who use drugs in B.C. at www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/overdose/decriminalization.

Should families, caregivers and friends be concerned if a loved one is using substances?

Remember that people use substances for a variety of reasons and not all substance use is problematic. If a loved one is using substances, it does not always mean they have a substance use disorder.

People may use substances for enjoyment and socializing, or to cope with pain or trauma. Substance use falls along a spectrum, from no use of any substances or using substances for positive or social benefits, to having problems

with substance use, and at the far end of the spectrum, having a substance use disorder.

A harm reduction approach to substance use can support and build trust for loved ones who use substances.

How can families, caregivers and friends reduce harm with people who use substances?

- Use person-first language (for example “person with substance use disorder” or “person in recovery”). Avoid stigmatizing terms and judgment
- Recognize the impacts of historical and ongoing trauma (such as colonialism, poverty, and violence) on the health of many people who use substances
- Use a relational approach (listen and communicate with respect and compassion). Accept people where they are, regardless of their substance use
- Offer supports to reduce harm (for example offer new harm reduction equipment like needles and safe disposal, carry a take home naloxone kit, share and provide connections to community services and culturally appropriate safe spaces). Accept that the person may not want supports at this time

How can families, caregivers, and friends reduce harm with a youth who is using substances?

- Offer fact-based information on substances, their effects, early signs of negative impacts, and ways to reduce harm. Avoid fear-based substance use education

- Provide regular opportunities for open conversations about substance use and mental health. Share trusted resources where they can find more information on safer substance use practices and mental health
- Recognize connections between violence, trauma, discrimination, and substance use as a way to cope. Support connections to youth-specific services
- Provide opportunities for youth to discuss mental health and mental illness. Support them in finding health and social services, and connection to community and culture

How can I support myself if a loved one is experiencing problematic substance use or substance use disorder?

If you are supporting a loved one who is experiencing problematic substance use or substance use disorder, it is important to take care of yourself:

- Participate in an in-person or online support group
- Take time and space for your own health and wellbeing through sports, art, dance, music, cultural teachings and ceremony, clubs and hobbies
- Connect with other people in your loved one's life who can provide support

For more information

- Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions – Stop Overdose www.stopoverdose.gov.bc.ca
- Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions – Help Starts Here: Harm Reduction <https://helpstartshere.gov.bc.ca/substance-use/harm-reduction>
- Toward the Heart <https://towardtheheart.com>
- Here to Help: Mental health and substance use information www.heretohelp.bc.ca
- Kelty Mental Health <https://kelymentalhealth.ca>
- Foundry <https://foundrybc.ca>

See the following HealthLinkBC Files:

- [HealthLinkBC File #30a The harmful effects of second-hand smoke](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #30b Risks of alternative tobacco and nicotine products](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #30c Quitting smoking](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #38d Pregnancy and alcohol use](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #97 Contact with blood or body fluids: Protecting against infection](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #102a Understanding harm reduction: Substance use](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #118 Naloxone: Treating opioid overdose](#)



BC Centre for Disease Control
Provincial Health Services Authority

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/more/resources/healthlink-bc-files or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C. visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.