

Harm minimization: advice about safer drug use¹

WHERE? Safer places to use drugs

Taking drugs with friends is safer than doing it alone.

Avoid using drugs in isolated places (eg toilets, derelict buildings, canal banks, railway lines).

HOW? Safer methods of taking drugs

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 one to two hours and may be stronger than you expected.

Injecting drugs is more risky because there is a greater chance of:

- overdose
- infection
- abscesses
- blood clots (thromboses)
- blood poisoning (septicaemia)
- gangrene
- death.

If you intend to inject drugs, help and advice is available from your local needle and syringe exchange. It is more dangerous to inject in big veins like the groin or neck.

It is safer not to inject.

Sharing needles, syringes, filters, spoons and water should **always** be avoided to reduce the risk of HIV, Hepatitis B and C transmission. Ask your GP about Hepatitis B vaccination. Don't be tempted to use other people's 'wash outs'. It isn't just the needle that's dangerous, it's everything used for injecting that could pass on the virus.

Hygiene is very important when injecting drugs — always remember to use clean, preferably new, equipment and make sure your hands and the injection site are clean.

Mixing drugs

Avoid cocktails of drugs — mixing drugs makes it more difficult to predict what will happen and for how long.

¹ Taken, with permission, from: 'Problem Drug Use: a guide to management in general practice' Nottingham Alcohol and Drug Team, The Wells Road Centre, Nottingham, NG3 3AA

Combining alcohol and drugs is surprisingly risky — it can lead to respiratory depression, which means you may stop breathing. A further risk is that you may choke on your vomit. Many accidental overdoses and deaths are thought to be caused by people mixing drugs, particularly alcohol.

Remember, less is safer.

SPECIAL RISKS

A drug-free period (eg prison, rehab) leads to reduced tolerance. You will find that a smaller dose is needed to achieve the same effects. Your previous dose is likely to result in **overdose, even death**.

Intoxication can reduce your inhibitions and make you less careful, putting you at greater risk of:

- sharing injecting equipment
- accidents
- unsafe sex
- overdose
- being a victim of crime.

Drugs from an unknown source

Illicit drugs vary considerably in their strength, which may lead to overdose.

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 (eg Pakistan not Turkey), pay attention to the experiences of your friends.

What to do if someone overdoses

1. Make sure they have fresh air.
2. Turn them **onto their side** (not their back) on the floor and try not to leave them alone (otherwise, if they are sick, they might inhale vomit).
3. Dial 999 immediately and ask for an ambulance.
4. 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.
5. If you are aware of other first aid measures, use them.