



Harm Reduction for Families and Caregivers

What is harm reduction?

Harm reduction includes policies, programs and practices that aim to keep people safe and to reduce deaths, disease and injuries from high-risk behaviour, especially related to psychoactive substance use. Harm reduction recognizes that the high risk behaviour may continue despite the risks.

Harm reduction involves a range of support services and strategies to enhance the knowledge, skills, resources, and supports for individuals, families and communities to be safer and healthier.

How can I reduce harm?

There are many ways that you can reduce harm.

- Wash your hands to reduce the spread of germs and disease.
- Brush your teeth to reduce dental decay.
- Use seat belts and approved child car seats to reduce serious injury or death.
- Wear a helmet, knee, elbow, and wrist pads during sports activities to reduce serious head and body injuries.
- If you smoke, do so outside of your home to prevent exposing your family to second-hand smoke.
- If you plan to drink alcohol, designate a driver to prevent accidents and injuries.

How can parents, caregivers and communities reduce harm?

A strong community is the result of healthy individuals and families. Together we can all make a difference.

- Support school-based education programs on tobacco, alcohol and other drugs that offer

children clear, accurate information about the harms and benefits of substance use and the skills to make safe, healthy choices throughout their lives.

- Support and assist with programs that engage children in activities such as sports, art, dance, music, special interest clubs and hobbies. These activities help children develop self-respect, confidence and positive relationships with their families, culture and community, and a sense of belonging, pride and tradition.
- Provide children with the information and skills to stay safe, including teaching them what to do when they cross the street, if they are approached by a stranger, or if they find a needle.

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

Harm reduction can have many benefits for people who use substances, their families and their communities. Research shows harm reduction activities can help in a number of ways. They can:

- Reduce hepatitis and HIV.
- Reduce overdose deaths and other early deaths among people who use substances.
- Reduce injection substance use and the frequency of injecting.
- Reduce the number of used needles and other drug equipment found in public.
- Reduce the sharing of needles and other substance use equipment.
- Reduce crime and increase employment among people who use substances.
- Educate about safer injecting and smoking and reduce the frequency of use.

- Educate about safer sex and sexual health, and increase condom use.
- Increase referrals to treatment programs and health and social services.

What services are available for people who use substances?

A range of services is available to prevent harms from substance use. Some examples include:

- Needle distribution/recovery programs that distribute sterile needles and other harm reduction supplies, recover used needles and other supplies, and provide information and containers for their safe disposal.
- Substitution therapies that substitute illegal heroin with legal, non-injection methadone or other prescribed opioids.
- Take home naloxone program that provides an antidote to opioids to reverse an overdose thereby preventing brain injury, due to depressed breathing, and death.
- Supervised consumption facilities that help prevent overdose deaths and other harms by providing a safer, supervised environment for people using substances.
- Outreach and education services that make contact with people who use substances to encourage safer behavior.
- Peer support programs that are groups run and attended by people who use substances to improve their quality of life and to address gaps in services.
- Impaired driving prevention campaigns that create awareness of the risks of driving under the influence of alcohol and other legal or illegal substances.

For More Information

- Ministry of Health - Harm Reduction: A British Columbia Community Guide

www.health.gov.bc.ca/library/publications/year/2005/hrcommunityguide.pdf.

- Toward the Heart <http://towardtheheart.com/>

See the following HealthLinkBC Files:

- [HealthLinkBC Files #08o Preventing Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STIs\)](#)
- [HealthLinkBC Files #30a The Harmful Effects of Second-hand Smoke](#)
- [HealthLinkBC Files #30b Tobacco Products are not a Safe Alternative to Cigarettes](#)
- [HealthLinkBC Files #30c Quitting Smoking](#)
- [HealthLinkBC Files #38d Pregnancy and Alcohol Use](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #85 Hand Washing for Parents and Children](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #97 Contact with Blood or Body Fluids: Protecting against Infection](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #102a Understanding Harm Reduction: Substance Use](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #118 Treating Opioid Overdose: B.C.'s Take Home Naloxone Program](#)

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles or your local public health unit.

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