

Fact Sheet

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Guidance about COVID-19 Risk for Harm Reduction and Syringe Service Programs

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to Harm Reduction and Syringe Service Programs (SSP) to sustain crucial services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Programs need to consider short and long-term programmatic adaptations to serve the community. This guidance addresses short-term programmatic issues as well as client education and messaging.

Harm Reduction programs and SSPs provide a critical public health service and it is in the interest of public health that they continue to provide sterile syringes, infection and overdose prevention supplies to people who use drugs. Shared and re-used syringes and other drug use equipment can transmit HIV, viral hepatitis, COVID-19 and other viral and bacterial infections. People who use drugs need ongoing overdose prevention education, naloxone and drug checking strips. Decisions that reduce these essential services will only increase infections, disease, and death.

Many Harm Reduction programs and SSPs have made temporary changes to their services in response to COVID19, including changes to:

- **Operations.** These may include changes in use of volunteers/staff, days and hours of operation, and how sites are set-up. These changes assume ongoing efforts to maintain social distance among volunteers/staff and between volunteers/staff and clients.

- Volunteers hold critical roles in most Harm Reduction programs and SSPs. Volunteers may want to continue serving the community. Setting up sites to minimize the risk of COVID-19 infection and creating roles for volunteers to continue to participate will help your program to adapt during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Volunteers and staff who are among the COVID-19 risk populations, can be moved into roles that reduce their risk of COVID-19 exposure to other volunteers, staff, or clients, for example providing peer support by phone or video calls.
- Changes to staffing to reduce density of people within confined spaces such as vans and offices.
- Disinfecting surfaces between each client;
- During open hours, rotating onsite staff through roles that reduce each person's potential exposure to COVID-19.
- Moving fixed sites that are inside to the outdoors in locations where weather permits.
- Spreading tables apart to create more physical distance between people.
- Using a "curbside approach", with staff standing outside vans or offices taking client orders and staff inside filling those orders and putting them in bags that are given to clients.
- Taking phone orders for syringes, naloxone and supplies, and having bags ready for client or designated friend pick-up.
- Filling bags with pre-set numbers of syringes and separate bags with pre-set amounts of supplies for clients to pick-up the specific bags that have the items that they need.
- Keeping bathrooms open with a policy to disinfect bathroom surfaces between use.
- If someone shows up to a program site with a cough, fever or with symptoms of a respiratory infection if possible, provide them a mask or bandana to cover their mouth and nose, ask them to wait an appropriate distance from other clients, volunteers and staff, provide them SSP services and provide information about ways the person can seek health services.
- **Activities and Services.** To decrease the risk of COVID-19 transmission and support clients, programs should consider
 - Moving to a needs-based distribution of syringes, naloxone, condoms, and all drug use supplies including tie-offs, cookers, cottons, alcohol wipes, pipes and mouth pieces.
 - Pausing services where there is close contact or group gatherings, such as rapid HIV and HCV testing, support groups or naloxone group trainings.
 - Allowing clients to order supplies by phone and make bags for clients to pick-up.
 - Using prepackaged snacks and food in take-out bags
 - Providing items that will help clients take care of themselves, like disposable thermometers, doses of fever reducing medicine, hand sanitizer, hand wipes, snacks, gift cards, etc.

Messaging for People Who Use Substances

People who use substances and become infected with COVID-19 may be at an increased risk of serious illness or death because:

- Opioids, benzodiazepines, and alcohol slow breathing.
- Opioid withdrawal may worsen breathing difficulties.
- Vaping and smoking, including drugs like meth or crack, can make breathing problems worse.

Issues faced by people who are using substances during the COVID-19 epidemic:

- **Difficulty breathing.** If you smoke drugs, like meth or crack, cigarettes or vapes, COVID-19 infection will make it harder to inhale smoke. Smoking drugs, cigarettes, or vaping will make breathing problems worse.
- **Involuntary withdrawal.** It is not known what will happen to drug supplies during this time, so getting ready for involuntary withdrawal is important. If you can, try to put together necessary medications, food, and drinks needed to help detox. Try to have protein-based and electrolyte drinks like Pedialyte or Ensure.
 - If you use opioids or heroin and are interested in getting medication for opioid use disorder, phone a medical provider about starting buprenorphine or methadone.
 - If you use alcohol, you may be able to manage alcohol withdrawal and avoid problems like seizures by consuming an amount of alcohol equivalent to one can of beer, 1.5 ounces of rum, or 5 ounces of wine hourly as needed. Try to avoid bootleg alcohol.
- **Getting sick with COVID-19.** If you think you are getting sick,
 - Avoid going to your local harm reduction, syringe exchange or Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Treatment Program.
 - If your program has a phone number, call and ask if you can order syringes and supplies over the phone and have a friend pick-up them up for you.
 - Tell the Syringe Service Program person on the phone that you are sick so they can take steps to keep themselves and others safe.
 - If you have a cough, fever and feel sick enough to see a doctor and you do not know where to go, call 211. Before you go to a medical clinic or urgent care call and to let them know you are coming in and that you are sick and coughing. Avoid going to an Emergency Department unless you are having chest pain, trouble breathing, your lips are turning blue, or if you are taking care of someone, that person becomes very confused or difficult to wake up.

Harm Reduction Approaches and Supplies:

The COVID-19 pandemic may lead to a greater unpredictability in the drug supply and make your harm reduction practices even more important.

Because what we are facing is new, be prepared for the possibility that SSPs and SUD treatment programs may have to change how they are providing services, and the days or hours they are open. There is also the possibility that Harm Reduction programs and SSPs may run short of different supplies. If you are able, save up enough harm reduction supplies to last you a few weeks. Harm reduction practices can help you avoid COVID-19 infection, reduce your risk of other infections related to substance use, and prevent overdose.

You can reduce your risk of COVID-19 infection by:

- Trying to maintain space between yourself and others, 6 feet if you can.
- Not shaking hands, hugging, or sharing food or drinks.
- Covering your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze with a tissue and then throw the tissue in the trash. If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into the crook of your elbow.
- Washing your hands often with soap and water for 20 seconds. If you do not have soap and water, use an alcohol-based hand cleaner or wipes that contain at least 60% alcohol.
- Not touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoiding close contact with people who are sick.
- Cleaning and disinfecting surfaces that are often touched.
- Avoiding groups of more than 10 people.

You can reduce your risk of COVID-19 and other infections related to substance use by:

- **Not sharing syringes or drug use supplies.** Do not share syringes or any injecting equipment, cookers or spoons, meth or crack pipes, straws or other nasal tubes, bongs, vapes, or joints.
- **Cleaning your smoking supplies.** Use mouthpieces and pipe covers on your smoking supplies when possible. Frequently clean these mouthpieces and pipe covers using an alcohol-based cleaner or wipe (minimum 60% alcohol).
- **Not reusing syringes, but if you run out of new syringes, cleaning your own syringes.** New syringes are always best, but if you cannot get a new syringe you can clean a used syringe using diluted bleach (1-part bleach mixed with 10-parts clean water) to help prevent HIV and hepatitis C infection. When cleaning a used

syringe, the first step is to rinse any blood you can see off or out of the syringe. If you see blood in the syringe, draw up clean water and rinse the syringe clean to remove the blood. If you do not see blood, rinse the syringe once with the diluted bleach solution. Then rinse twice with clean water. If you don't have bleach, or you cannot make the diluted bleach solution, rinsing the syringe at least three times with clean water is better than not rinsing the syringe at all.

- **Not swallowing or putting drug bags or wraps in your mouth, vagina or anus.** This is a dangerous practice. If you must carry drugs in your body, clean the bag or wrap very well with an alcohol-based cleaner before you put it in and after you take it out.
- **Not splitting packages of drugs.** If you must split drugs, wipe down the bags or wraps with an alcohol-based cleaner or wipe, and have people wash or clean their hands before they touch the drugs.
- **Washing your hands with** soap and water for at least 20 seconds after you have contact with people, touch money or surfaces, handle drug bags or wraps, and before you prepare your drugs. If you cannot wash your hands, clean your hands with an alcohol-based cleaner or wipes (minimum 60% alcohol).
- **Preparing your own drugs.** Do not share, handle or touch other people's drugs or equipment and don't let them handle or touch your drugs or equipment.

You can reduce your risk of overdose by:

- **Having extra naloxone with you.** Emergency services may take longer than usual to respond during the COVID-19 pandemic. Your Harm Reduction program or SSP may be open fewer days or hours, or run short of supplies, so you might want to have some extra naloxone.
- **Not injecting alone.** Continue to be careful about overdose and try not to use alone, especially if you inject drugs like heroin, fentanyl, or drugs that might have contact with them. If you have a phone, call someone, tell them where you are and ask them to stay on the line while you are injecting so they can call 9-1-1 and if you become unresponsive.
- **Going slow and using less.** Going slow and testing the strength of a drug can help prevent accidental overdose.
- **Using fentanyl test strips before you use a drug.** Fentanyl may be mixed in with any street drug, including methamphetamine, and a positive test strip result lets you make informed decisions about preventing overdose.

For more information about Oregon's COVID-19 response, go to the Oregon Health Authority website: <https://govstatus.egov.com/OR-OHA-COVID-19>.

Community Resources and information about harm reduction and COVID-19

Organization	Resource Link
SAMHSA	COVID-19 Resources and Information
Lines for Life	Lines for Life
Never Use Alone - 800-484-3731	Never Use Alone
Oregon Recovery Network	Oregon Recovery Network
Oregon SUD Resources	OR Substance Use Disorder Resource Guide
Harm Reduction Coalition	COVID-19 Guidance for People Who Use Drugs and Harm Reduction Programs
Vital Strategies Fact Sheet	Resources for drug use and COVID-19 risk reduction
Oregon Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence	Oregon Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence
Bridge to Treatment: COVID-19 Guidance for People Who Use Drugs and Harm Reduction Programs	Bridge to Treatment: COVID-19 National Emergency Response
Oregon Health and Sciences University	COVID-19 Resources for Oregon
Yale Program in Addiction Medicine	Yale Program in Addiction Medicine COVID-19 Fact Sheets

*Adapted from the Yale Program in Addiction Medicine, Global Health Justice Partnership, and Crackdown 3/17/20, Vital Strategies, and the New York State Department of Health - Office of Drug User Health.
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