

Drug Use and Harm Reduction

Fact sheet 5

There are many different drugs used for recreational purposes, including cannabis, amphetamine, heroin, cocaine, khat, ecstasy and alcohol. Drugs (including tobacco) can affect your general health and may weaken the immune system.

Maintaining good health is important. In general, most recreational drugs do not improve your health. However, some experts argue that cannabis can actually be beneficial to people with certain medical conditions, including ones associated with HIV/AIDS.

Recreational drugs tend to get lumped together in one big bag and in many countries they are illegal. Ironically, tobacco and alcohol, which are equally or more harmful than some illegal recreational drugs, are legal in most countries in the world. Whatever the reasons, many people take drugs - for relaxation, to get high, to escape difficult or painful lives, because friends or partners are taking them.

Swallowing, sniffing or smoking drugs will not transmit HIV. Nor will drinking alcohol. However, these activities may harm your health or put you in situations where you take other risks.

Sharing unclean needles and syringes can transmit the HIV virus. Also, it's possible for HIV to be transmitted through other injecting equipment if it is not clean. It is important not to share cotton, spoons, bottle caps, or tobacco filters which you use to 'draw up' the drugs into the syringe. However, sharing used needles and syringes is *the* main way the virus is transmitted in drug use. Sharing needles is still a risk, even if you not inject directly into a vein, for example if you inject into the skin or muscle.

If you are in a situation where you have no choice about sharing equipment, there are effective ways to share *and* reduce the *possibility* of transmission. If you can commit yourself to good cleaning procedures, then you will have reduced the chances of transmission a great deal.

Although it doesn't guarantee the elimination of risk, it is much better than doing nothing. Try it out. You are worth it.

How to clean equipment

- Draw household bleach through the needle into the syringe and '**Shake 30**' by counting up to 30 seconds while shaking the syringe with the bleach in it
- Bottle caps or spoons or anything used to 'cook up' the drugs should be cleaned with bleach and water too
- Draw fresh cold water through the needle into the syringe and flush it three times
- Make sure you don't inject or drink the bleach
- Rubbing alcohol or drinking alcohol, or even washing-up liquid is better than nothing if bleach is not available
- Follow the same directions as you would with bleach
- Draw fresh cold water through the needle into the syringe and flush three times after flushing it with soapy water three times

Hot water is not recommended as heat makes blood go sticky so that traces of it may be left on the needle and in the syringe. Disposable needles will begin to melt if boiled.

More tips

Get rid of your used equipment carefully. If you do not have a 'sharps' bin put the needle and syringe into a tin can, crush the tin can to make sure nothing can fall out and put in a bin.

Other nasty infections can be passed on through injecting drug use. Hepatitis B and C are potentially very serious illnesses and are much more easily passed on by sharing injecting equipment than HIV. Also, sharing unclean syringes can expose you to different strains of HIV.