

Substance Use: What You Should Know

Many people use drugs and some of them may have a substance use disorder. Here's what you should know about working with people who use drugs.



What is a substance use disorder?

Continued substance use despite significant negative health and social effects.

Substance use occurs on a spectrum

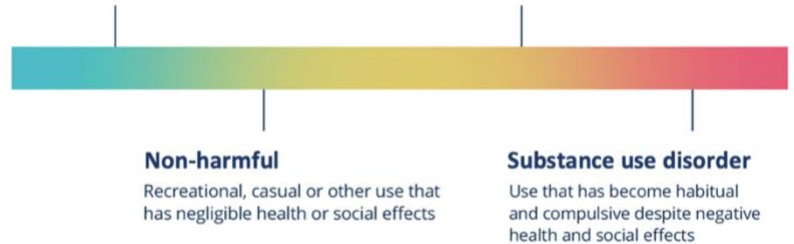
People have used drugs across different cultures and different times in history. Substance use is not inherently problematic; people can have challenges with some substances and not others, and may experience challenges with substances at different periods of time in their lives. Political, legal, and social contexts have immense impact on whether or not substance use is harmful. In BC, substance use and substance use care are informed by the risks of the toxic drug crisis.

Beneficial

Use that has positive health, spiritual and/or social impacts; e.g., medicinal use as prescribed, moderate consumption of alcohol

Harmful

Use at an early age, or use that begins to have negative health impacts for individuals, family/friends or society; e.g., use by minors, impaired driving, binge consumption



Students and health care providers should be proactive in asking people about substance use and discussing safer use options regardless of where the person sits on the spectrum of substance use.



Harm reduction

Harm reduction is a movement for social justice built on a belief in, and respect for, the rights of people who use drugs.

Meeting people where they are at

By creating laws, policies, programs, and interventions that centre respect and autonomy of people who use drugs—including respecting the choice to continue to use drugs—we can prevent systemic harms. People can use drugs safely when they have access to the right information, housing, tools, non-contaminated drugs, and money, among other determinants of health.

By providing safer tools and interventions, we show that we care about people who use drugs and are prioritizing their needs instead of judging their drug use.



Harm reduction can include approaches such as providing supplies (e.g., sterile syringes), education (e.g., safer injecting practices), and safer consumption (e.g., supervised consumption facilities), as well as supporting patients to reduce their use or use in ways that are less harmful (e.g., alternating alcohol drinks with non-alcoholic drinks or drinking lower-proof alcohol). [Indigenous Harm Reduction](#) centres the integration of cultural knowledge and values into concepts of harm reduction.



Addressing stigma and discrimination

Stigma exists because of the history of moralizing and criminalizing drug use rather than recognizing it as a common feature of our world.

What is stigma?

Stigma refers to a set of negative attitudes and beliefs that motivate people to fear and discriminate against other people due to their circumstances in life. It is shaped by the broader social, political, and legal context and influences how people interact with each other.

STIGMA: NEGATIVE ATTITUDES AND BELIEF ABOUT A GROUP OF PEOPLE DUE TO THEIR CIRCUMSTANCES IN LIFE



Stigma affects care

Many people who use drugs worry about being judged when accessing health care.

You can make a difference by interrogating your own beliefs about drugs and the people who use them. People who use drugs and experience marginalization or discrimination based on other intersecting factors such as poverty, class, race or ethnicity, or involvement in sex work experience compounded stigma and discrimination. Stigma also contributes to overdose deaths; the 2018 report [Illicit Drug Overdose Deaths in BC: Findings of Coroners' Investigations](#) found that the majority of people who died of an illicit drug overdose used drugs alone in their homes. Most people who have died of an overdose have had both mental health and substance use concerns, which shows an opportunity and need for screening and open conversations around both substance use and mental health.

Language matters

Avoid stigmatizing terms that demean or reduce people to their actions. Instead, use person-first language, such as “person with opioid use disorder” rather than “opioid user.” Consider asking your patient what words they would like you to use.



Cultural Safety

Cultural safety is an outcome based on respectful engagement that recognizes and strives to address power imbalances inherent in the health care system.

Indigenous Cultural Safety

Indigenous cultural safety is an approach that considers how social and historical contexts, institutional discrimination, structural and interpersonal power imbalances, and past, current, and ongoing colonization shape health and health care experiences of Indigenous peoples. As a result of colonization and ongoing systemic colonial harms, Indigenous peoples are over-represented in overdose deaths and drug-related harms. Understanding the impact of colonization and ongoing anti-Indigenous racism on access and engagement in health care is essential for providing better care for Indigenous people who use drugs. Learn more by reading the [In Plain Sight](#) report, which describes findings of anti-Indigenous racism in the BC health care system, or reports from the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#).

Improving care for all

British Columbia is home to many diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic groups who have the right to receive health care in an environment free from racism and discrimination. Building your awareness of how institutions perpetuate systemic racism, engaging in continuous self-reflection on personal biases, and understanding the ways power and privilege impact health and health care can improve care for all.



Trauma- and violence-informed care

Many people who use substances have experienced adverse childhood experiences, trauma, or structural violence.

Providing trauma- and violence-informed care

- Build your awareness of the prevalence of [adverse childhood experiences](#) and trauma.
- Focus on developing trust and building a sense of safety in your interactions with clients.
- Safety and trust can be enhanced by providing opportunities for choice, collaboration, and connection.
- For example, tell your clients how excited you are that they came in today, be mindful of your own well-being, and take the time to truly listen. It's all about relationships.



Trauma- and violence-informed care resources

- EQUIP Health Care [Trauma- & Violence-Informed Care Tool](#)
- EQUIP Health Care [Health Equity Toolkit](#)
- Centre of Excellence for Women's Health [Trauma Informed Practice Guide](#)



Treatment options are available!

Depending on the substance use disorder, treatment options may include both pharmacotherapy and psychosocial treatment interventions.

If a person is looking for treatment, options are available:

- Evidence-based pharmacotherapy and psychosocial treatment interventions can be offered either alone or in combination with each other.
- Treatment options are available for people who want to reduce or abstain from substance use.
- Treatment options vary by substance use disorder. Some treatments are available through primary care providers, while others require specialist referral or consultation.



To learn more, register for the [Addiction Care and Treatment Online Course](#)

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