

## Coronavirus (COVID-19) Helpful information on substance use during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 virus can affect anyone. Everyone needs to practice social distancing and self-isolation as much as possible. Individuals who use substances often have a weakened immune system along with other conditions that place them at greater risk of getting COVID-19 infection. The following information can help increase safety during this pandemic.

**It is important to remember that early symptoms of withdrawal from substances are very similar to those of COVID-19. This can include fever and muscle soreness. If you experience a cough, do not dismiss it as this could be COVID-19.** In this case, call 811 or your primary care practitioner.

Individuals who use substances are often at greater risk of developing complications if infected with COVID-19.

- **Opioids, Benzos, and alcohol:** Opioids, benzos, and alcohol already impact breathing; using these substances and becoming infected with COVID-19 can make breathing worse
- **Opioid withdrawal:** Experiencing withdrawal from opioids can worsen difficulties breathing if infected with COVID-19
- **Smoking:** Vaping, smoking cigarettes, or drugs like crack or meth, will make breathing problems worse if infected with COVID-19.

### ALCOHOL

Excessive alcohol use can affect breathing. If infected, the COVID-19 virus can make breathing even more difficult. For anyone experiencing alcohol use disorder, periods of self-isolation can present challenges. Staying in touch with local addiction and mental health centers is important; these services are still open during the pandemic. While it can be tempting to have a stockpile of alcohol to last during period of self-isolation or quarantine, it is important to plan ahead and avoid bingeing and increasing risks.

#### Helpful tips:

- Setting time limits before starting to consume alcohol. For example, this could be deciding to stop drinking at 9pm. Reminding oneself of the plan is helpful. Planning to have a non-alcoholic beverage like pop or juice ready for the time set can help reduce the temptation to have another drink passed the established time limit
- Having a meal or a good snack before starting to drink can be helpful; remember to avoid salty foods as these may increase thirst
- Alternating every second drink with water or some other non-alcoholic beverage
- This could be a good time to start reducing alcohol intake; an example of this could be to have a dedicated alcohol-free day. It could also be to have one or more fewer drinks than usual. After slowly reducing how much alcohol you drink each day, consider giving

your body a healthy break by taking a break from drinking alcohol. To help with this, remember that buying less alcohol (having less of it available at home where you may decide to drink just because it is there) can help you to drink less.

- If you are going to drink, consider drinking lower alcohol content beverages (e.g., beer, wine) instead of higher alcohol content beverages (e.g., spirits) to lower your risk, and follow [Canada's lower risk drinking guidelines](#).
- It can be dangerous to stop drinking alcohol for people who have serious alcohol use disorders; If you are concerned about risks of withdrawal, contact your local addiction and mental health services centers for guidance; these remain open during the pandemic
- Supports are very important. Reaching out to someone who understands what you may be going through can be very helpful
- REMEMBER: If you are already in treatment for alcohol use disorder, it is particularly important to stay in contact with your counsellor; this is not a time to delay treatment.

### **SMOKING AND VAPING**

Remember that from vaping, to smoking cigarettes or drugs like crack or meth, can make breathing problems worse for people who become infected with COVID-19. It is important to keep track of any symptoms of infection; coughing or worsening of coughing can become serious issues during this pandemic.

### **OPIOIDS AND OTHER DRUGS**

Opioids affect breathing. For individuals who take opioids, crack, meth or other substances, a COVID-19 infection can make breathing even more difficult. For those who experience opioid use disorders, or other substance use disorders, periods of self-isolation can be especially challenging. It is especially important for people who are already in treatment to keep scheduled appointments and stay in touch with counsellors. Addiction and mental health services remain open during the pandemic.

Self-isolation can be difficult. Individuals who use substances may choose to have a stock pile of their drug of choice during self-isolation. If this is the case, paying attention to personal drug consumption is important as is avoiding bingeing. Try to only purchase drugs from people you trust and plan ahead so that your supply lasts during periods of self-isolation or quarantine.

Helpful tips:

- Buying less drugs can help people use less. As with anything else, buying large amounts of your drug of choice can make it very easy to use more just because it is there
- Having a Take Home Naloxone kit handy can save lives in the event of overdosing. Have a Take Home Naloxone kit in your possession and let others in your environment know where it is in the event of an opioid overdose. More information on Take Home Naloxone kits can be found clicking on the following link: <https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/corporate/promo/opioids.html>
- Lowering dosage and frequency. This means smoking or injecting in smaller amounts and less often than usual

- Choosing a method of use that is less harmful. Injecting drugs for example can be riskier than smoking, snorting or swallowing it. An example for cannabis use would be to avoid bong and pipes and instead using a vaporizer or smoking a joint
- Planning drug free days. If it safe to do so, it can be a good time to start trying drug free days. This could be using drugs every second day, or incorporating a designated drug use free day during the week. This works best if alternative activities or hobbies are planned for these days to avoid thinking or craving drugs
- Individuals who experience serious substance use disorders may experience adverse health risks as a result of withdrawal; if you are concerned about withdrawal symptoms, contact your local addiction and mental health center for guidance. These services remain open during the pandemic.
- Accessing supports: Supports are very important during these times. Having a support system ready can make it easier to reach out to individuals who understand what you may be going through. Reaching out for support can be helpful in sticking to established plans.

**REMEMBER: Individuals who are already receiving treatment for substance use disorders NEED to stay in treatment and in contact with counsellors; this is not a time to avoid treatment. Those on Opioid Agonist Therapy must continue with their treatment and stay in contact with their methadone or suboxone providers; this is not a time to de-prioritize your recovery.**

## **HARM REDUCTION TIPS**

### **HARM REDUCTION PRACTICES CAN HELP AVOID A COVID-19 INFECTION**

- Avoid sharing drug supplies: drug supplies, injecting equipment, pipes, spoons, straws or any other nasal tool used to inhale or snort, vapes, joints and drinks can spread the COVID-19 virus. Contact your local Needle Distribution Program for more information on harm reduction practices during COVID-19 pandemic <http://www.aidsnb.com/en/>, <http://avenueb.ca/>, <https://ensemblegm.ca/>
- Avoid injecting alone: there are still concerns about tainted drug supplies. The risk of overdose remains present. When using, it can be valuable to contact a trusted individual and have them stay on the line while injecting or using so that the person can contact 911 in the event of an overdose. If using in the presence of other individuals, remember to practice social distancing by keeping 6 feet between people to reduce the risk of becoming infected with COVID-19. Cough or sneeze into your arm, avoid touching your face and remember to wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and water to reduce the risks of getting infected with COVID-19. Have a Take Home Naloxone Kit handy
- Clean your smoking supplies: whenever possible, clean supplies and drug packages well with an alcohol-based cleaner or wipe (this needs to have a minimum of 60%

alcohol concentration to have the greatest impact) to avoid getting into contact with the COVID-19 virus

- Wash your hands: Washing hands frequently, and especially after handling drug deliveries is important. Wash your hands with warm soapy water for at least 20 seconds every time you come in contact with others. If you don't have access to soap and water, try to use a hand sanitizer solution
- Drug preparation: avoid handling other people's drugs or equipment and do not allow others to handle yours.

There are several reputable online resources and websites that can provide you with more helpful tips and information during this challenging time. These include among others:

- Government of New Brunswick provides a trusted resource for directives to follow in New Brunswick, up to date information and resources for mental health and addictions [www.gnb.ca/coronavirus](http://www.gnb.ca/coronavirus)
- The Canadian Center for Substance Use provides a variety of tips and tools to help during this challenging time <https://www.ccsa.ca/>
- The BC CDC offers valuable tips for people who use substances <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/vulnerable-populations/people-who-use-substances>
- The Canadian Mental Health Association provides information on COVID 19 and mental well being <https://cmha.ca/news/covid-19-and-mental-health>