How to Practice Harm Reduction in the Age of COVID-19

Novel coronavirus guidance for people who use drugs and for groups that provide syringe services.

March 14, 2020 By Trent Straube

The Harm Reduction Coalition offers COVID-19 advice for people who inject drugs and the community-based organizations that serve them. COVID-19 is the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

In addition to taking general precautions to avoid the new coronavirus—such as washing hands frequently, avoiding public gatherings and keeping your hands away from your face—people who use drugs can take extra steps to avoid COVID-19 while practicing safer drug use.

Precautions for unique populations may vary. For example, see the POZ magazine article "UPDATED: What People With HIV Need to Know About the New Coronavirus."

Regarding people who use drugs, the Harm Reduction Coalition's guidance recommends stocking supplies, including injecting equipment, prescription meds and your drug of choice—all of which may become in short supply during a novel coronavirus outbreak. Below is a summary of other guidance from the coalition:

TIPS FOR PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS

Practice Safer Drug Use

- Try not to share supplies, including e-cigarettes, pipes, joints and straws. If you do end up sharing, then wipe down the mouthpiece with alcohol swabs.

- Minimize physical contact as much as possible, even during sex work; the coronavirus can be spread through kissing, coughing and contact with body fluids.

- Prepare your own drugs and keep surfaces clean using microbial wipes, alcohol (at least 70%) or bleach.

- Plan and prepare for an overdose; keep back-up supplies of naloxone, which helps revers an opioid overdose, and fentanyl testing strips, which detect the presence of the powerful drug often linked to overdoses. Also: keep in mind that emergency health services might be overworked dealing with COVID-19 illnesses.

Keep Clean & Practice Hygiene

- Keep your space clean and wiped down (see above).

- Wash your hands often—with soap, for at least 20 seconds, or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

- Stay away from others if you're sick. This includes not going to your local syringe service provider. Also, if you have HIV, be sure to take your meds to keep your immune system as healthy as possible.

TIPS FOR COMMUNITY-BASED SYRINGE SERVICES & HARM REDUCTION PROVIDERS

Prioritize & Prepare Your People

- Focus on the safety of staff and participants. This includes ensuring that that sick employees stay home and that vaccinations—such as for the seasonal flu and hepatitis A and B—are offered and updated.

- Sanitize surfaces, especially those that are commonly touched.

- Offer extra supplies to participant and stock up on your own supply.

Plan Ahead

- Expect and plan for employees to be out.
- Review which of your services are essential; which can be postponed.
- Stay updated on info from local health departments.
- Create or update your communications plan—how will you reach out to employees and participants during disruptions.
- Medication backup: Be prepared to help clients who need prescriptions fills for meds to treat HIV, hepatitis and other chronic illnesses. Be sure that your methadone and buprenorphine providers—the two meds commonly used in treating opioid addiction—have emergency supplies.

For more details about the guidance, including PDFs you can download, visit HarmReduction.org. The COVID-19 tips were provided by Higher Ground Harm Reduction, Reynolds Health Strategies, Harm Reduction Coalition and Vital Strategies.

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