

Harm Reduction Tips for Those Who Choose to Use Substances

The best way to take care of your health is to choose NOT to use substances (vaping, alcohol, marijuana, street drugs) at all. No amount is safe.

- If you are thinking about using substances, consider delaying use until you are older. Many teens choose not to use substances. The later you can wait if you decide to use substances, the safer. Your brain keeps developing until you are about 25 years old.
- If you are currently using substances, consider cutting back or quitting and using other methods to reduce harm from substances.

Consider Cutting Back or Quitting

Use less often...

- If you do decide to use substances, do not use them every day or try taking breaks (sometimes called “tolerance breaks”) to give your brain and body a chance to recover and reduce the harm.

Use smaller amounts...

- Plan ahead. Bring only a set amount of money, drinks or substances. Ask your friends to help monitor your use or remind you to stop after reaching a pre-agreed upon amount (with alcohol, for instance, count the number of drinks).
- Stop if you don't like how you are feeling or if you aren't feeling well. For instance, the way marijuana (weed/pot) affects the body and brain is very different for each person. Your own experience can change from one time to the next.
- Make sure you eat before or while using substances.
- If you smoke or vape marijuana, try not to take deep breaths or hold your breath; if drinking alcohol, sip your drink slowly to make it last and try alternating non-alcoholic drinks (water, pop, juice) with alcoholic ones.

Tips for Cutting Back or Quitting

- Learn your triggers which can include certain people, feelings or situations. It might be best to avoid these situations when you are first trying to cut back or quit.
- Resist temptations. Avoid places or situations where others are using substances. Choose other activities or different groups of friends. If you can't avoid these situations, plan ahead of time how you will handle them.
- Set a realistic goal and a step-by-step plan. For instance, pick a day that you will start to make a change. Write down what that change will look like and tell your friends/family about it for extra support.
- Prepare for how you will manage any withdrawal symptoms or cravings. Knowing what to expect and planning ahead will help you through the “tough moments.”

Withdrawal symptoms

- Withdrawal symptoms can occur with any substance (alcohol, marijuana, illegal drugs, even nicotine) that is used heavily and/or regularly. Mild symptoms can include irritability, anxiety/depression, headache, nausea, vomiting, trouble sleeping, sweating or not feeling like eating. More serious problems can include hallucinations, or being out of touch with reality. These symptoms can last days or even weeks. The heavier your use has been, the more likely you are to have these symptoms when you stop.
- Seek medical care to help you with cutting back or quitting, particularly if your use has been heavy and/or regular. Seek care and support for mental health issues which may arise.

Consider other ways to make substance use safer

A safer environment

- Do not use substances when you are alone.
- If you do choose to use substances, do so in a place that is safe and with friends you can trust.
- With alcohol, take your own drinks and do NOT leave your drink unattended (open a new one when you return). Someone could tamper with it when you are gone.
- Avoid mixing substances—including alcohol, marijuana, and vaping—with each other, or with other substances such as energy drinks, medication (prescription or over-the-counter) or other drugs. You could have very unexpected reactions.

Transportation

- Do not drive a car, ride a scooter or ride a bicycle after using substances (alcohol, marijuana, illegal drugs). Your concentration, attention, coordination and reaction time in an emergency are decreased. You are more likely to get into an accident.
- Do not get into a car with anyone who has been using substances.

Resources

- The Kids Help website provides Information on alcohol, tobacco (including vaping) and drugs: <https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/drug-alcohol/?WT.ac=t-nav-drug-alcohol#catbehavior>. Tips on setting goals: <https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/goals-tips.html?WT.ac=ctg#catgetting-help>.
- The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) website provides information on substances such as alcohol and cannabis: www.camh.ca.
- US website on quitting/cutting back on vaping: <https://teen.smokefree.gov/>.

