

Harm reduction for drug users

In Northern Ireland, 3 out of 4 drug-related deaths involve more than one drug or a combination of one or more drugs and alcohol. In many cases, prescription drugs (for example diazepam or tramadol) are involved.

In the UK in 2012, 251 new psychoactive substances were identified and new drugs are being identified at a rate of around one per week. These are not controlled in any way, and you can never know what you are taking. The only way to avoid all the risks is to not take any drugs which are not prescribed for you. However, if you do choose to take drugs, the advice below may help reduce the risks for you.

This is intended to be general advice, and does not relate to any specific drug or type of drug. It has been informed by the experiences of drug users.

Preparing to take drugs

- The only way to avoid all the risks is to not take any drugs which are not prescribed for you. Think carefully about the risks before you start, especially if you have mental health problems, as using any drugs you have not been prescribed can put your mental health at greater risk.
- Try to take drugs with someone else there, ideally someone you can trust to look after you if things go wrong.
- Try to eat well, rest and drink plenty of liquid before you start using drugs. You'll feel better after the session. Avoid alcohol or energy drinks if at all possible.
- Make sure you know what you are buying. Describe what you want, including the effects you are seeking from the drug, and see if this matches what the seller is offering. If going to a new seller, be particularly cautious and ask questions about the product especially if it looks, smells or tastes different to what you are used to.
- Carry condoms so that you don't have unprotected sex. Drugs and alcohol raise the desire for sex but decrease performance, making orgasm for both sexes harder to achieve. This can lead to more vigorous sex, especially with stimulant use, which can cause a condom to rip. So have spare condoms and a water-based lubricant available.

Mixing drugs

Mixing any drug with another drug increases the risk of dangerous side effects. This includes alcohol.

Some drugs are especially risky to mix. This includes:

- cocaine and alcohol;
- opioids (such as heroin or morphine) and downers (such as benzos), alcohol or other opioids such as tramadol.

Prescription drugs which are highly likely to cause serious side effects when taken along with an illegal drug or drugs include:

- painkillers (such as morphine, oxycodone, co-codamol, tramadol);
- antidepressants (fluoxetine/Prozac, amitriptyline);
- tranquilisers and sleepers (diazepam, nitrazepam, phenazepam);
- drugs normally used for epilepsy and nerve pain such as Lyrica/pregabalin

Taking drugs

- Start low and go slow, especially if you are taking a drug you have never used before. Take a small amount at first and let it reach its peak effect to test how strong it is. Remember, you can always take more later on – you can never go back and take less.
- Remember that different drugs act at different speeds, and a slow response does not necessarily mean that the drug is weak – it may mean you have taken a slow-acting drug which could in fact be strong. Redosing could lead to overdose.
- Bear in mind that drugs that look the same as each other may not be the same. A pill or powder that looks like one you took last week may in fact have entirely different drugs in it.
- It is important to keep hydrated. Aim to drink about a pint of fluid per hour during the session. Avoid alcohol as this causes dehydration. Energy drinks contain lots of caffeine which can increase the strain on the heart. Keeping hydrated is especially important in warm, sunny weather.
- Look after your friends. It's ok to tell each other to take it easy; that's what good friends do. Don't let anyone go off by themselves. If anyone becomes unwell stay with them. Some people can become aggressive. This can be a sign of someone having taken too much and may be an indicator of overdose.

- If you or a friend have any worrying symptoms, call an ambulance. Try to remain calm, keep the noise down in the area and reassure the person that you are there to help. If they are breathing normally encourage them to put themselves into the recovery position or at least to keep still.

If you experience any worrying symptoms, contact the hospital Emergency Department as soon as possible. The sooner you present to the Emergency Department, the greater the likelihood that any treatment will be successful

Coming down

- Try to avoid taking other drugs to help you come down as these could prolong the come down or even cause overdose.
- Go somewhere you feel safe to relax and keep numbers of people you can talk to in your phone if you start to feel depressed, frightened or unwell.
- Some people experience suicidal thoughts and feelings after taking drugs, especially after a binge. If you are concerned about yourself or another user, make sure you talk to someone like a GP, addiction service or mental health service immediately. Lifeline counsellors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to listen in confidence. Contact Lifeline on 0808 808 8000.

Where can I get more information or help?

If you think you may have a problem with drugs, your GP can provide help and advice and refer you to other relevant services. Information and advice on drugs can also be obtained by ringing the National Drugs Helpline (Frank) on 0800 77 66 00. If you or someone else has immediate serious health concerns relating to drug use, emergency services should be contacted immediately. If you or someone else is in distress or despair, Lifeline's counsellors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to listen in confidence. Contact Lifeline at 0808 808 8000.

If you have taken a drug which has had unexpected unpleasant side effects and you think other people should be warned about it, please contact the Drug and Alcohol Monitoring and Information System at damis@hscni.net . This information will be treated in confidence and will be used only to warn other drug users.