

REDUCING THE HARM OF INJECTION DRUG USE

Skills to Be Learned

- Identifying the Harm of Injection Drug Use
- Learning Harm Reduction Techniques (e.g., needle cleaning)
- Reducing Cue-elicited Craving

No matter where you are in your recovery, even if you are abstinent from all illicit drugs, your decision to live a healthy lifestyle needs to include being prepared. This means being prepared for a “slip” and knowing how you can reduce the harm that the “slip” will cause you and others. If you are not yet abstinent, these skills will help you reduce the harm of drug use while you work towards achieving abstinence.



Although this illustration is amusing, the message “be prepared” is very serious. It can save your life or the life of another. In this chapter, we focus on how to make injection drug use less dangerous (that is, how to reduce the harm caused by injecting drugs). Some people find this topic uncomfortable, especially those individuals who have achieved abstinence. However, learning how to reduce harm in the event of a slip is extremely important. It may help to think of this as a fire drill. A fire drill does not give people permission to set fires; however it does prepare them for reducing the potentially devastating consequences of a fire by showing them how to use a fire extinguisher and how to leave the situation safely. Remember, you are not giving yourself permission to inject drugs by learning harm reduction techniques. Rather you are showing respect for your health and for the health of others by being prepared in the event that an unintended slip occurs.

Before we talk about harm reduction, let’s first identify the harm that drug use can cause. Here are some examples:

- **Legal Harm** = arrest, conviction, prison;
- **Emotional Harm** = depression, anxiety, fear, loss of self-respect;

- **Family/Social Harm** = loss of family, damage to children, loss of trust;
- **Financial Harm** = loss of job, expense of drug habit;
- **Medical Harm** = HIV, hepatitis, endocarditis, abscesses, cellulitis, osteomyelitis, decreased CD4 count, impaired immune system.

Can you think of any other harms caused by drugs?

In this chapter we are focusing specifically on the medical harm of injection drug use. We know that some people who have tested positive for HIV, even those who are in addiction treatment, may continue to inject drugs and may share needles or “works”. We also know that sharing needles or works is a sure way of transmitting diseases like HIV. The harm reduction techniques we will be covering in this chapter may help protect people from one of the most damaging effects of continued drug use—transmission of infections. However, keep in mind that these strategies do not protect you in any way from the other harms of drug use.

C.A.R.E.

You may be wondering why you should worry about sharing needles or works if you are already infected with HIV. Just remember the word **CARE**.

C = Compromised immune system. When you are HIV-positive, your immune system is compromised, and therefore exposure to other infections is potentially very dangerous.

A = Altruism. That means having concern for the welfare of others.

R = Reinfection. By sharing needles or works or having unsafe sex, individuals with HIV could potentially become re-infected with a strain of HIV that is resistant to some of the newer treatments. Therefore, you may greatly reduce your treatment options.

E = Evidence. Research has shown that HIV can live in a syringe for at least 4 weeks. Just consider that someone with HIV may have used a needle just once a month ago, and a friend or partner sees it and decides to use it—that person has now been exposed to HIV or, if already HIV-positive, may have been exposed to another HIV strain or perhaps to other infections that may lead to AIDS.

So, there are very good reasons for an individual who is HIV-positive to CARE, not share. Unless you know for certain that your needle is new, never assume that it is clean unless **you** cleaned it properly with full-strength bleach.

Harm Reduction is as simple as A-B-C.

A = Abstinence

B = Buy or obtain new needles

C = Clean needle with full-strength bleach

A = Abstinence

Because any drug use is dangerous, the best way to prevent harm is by abstaining from drugs.

B = Buy or obtain new needles – Never share needles/works.

Other than abstaining from injection drug use, the second best way of avoiding harm is by always using a new needle—never share needles or works and don't reuse needles even if not shared with others. There are two reasons to always use new/sterile needles. First, it is the best way to be sure a needle is not contaminated. Second, because used needles (even ones that have been cleaned) are less sharp, they are more likely to collapse or harm your veins than new ones.

- **Never** assume a needle bought on the street is new even if it is in a wrapper.
- Besides getting new needles from a drug store, the best way to be sure you're getting a sterile needle is by using **needle exchange programs** (if one is available in your community).

C = Clean your needle/works with full-strength household bleach.

When you're not abstinent and don't have a new needle, the next best way of reducing the harm of injection drug use is by cleaning your needles/works with bleach.

Procedure:

1. Rinse syringe with water to remove any visible drug or blood.
2. Submerge needle and fill barrel of syringe with bleach.
3. Shake/tap syringe while bleach is in it to break up clots.
4. Keep bleach in syringe for **at least 30 seconds**. Remember: **Less than 30, it's still dirty!**
5. Squirt out bleach into waste cup (or cooker).
6. **Repeat** Steps 2–5 using new bleach and shake/tap for **another 30 seconds**.

7. Fill a disposable cup with water and fill the syringe
8. Squirt out water into waste cup (or cooker).
9. Rinse again with clean water.
10. Eject water into waste cup (or cooker).
11. Take the syringe apart (remove the plunger) to improve the cleaning procedure.

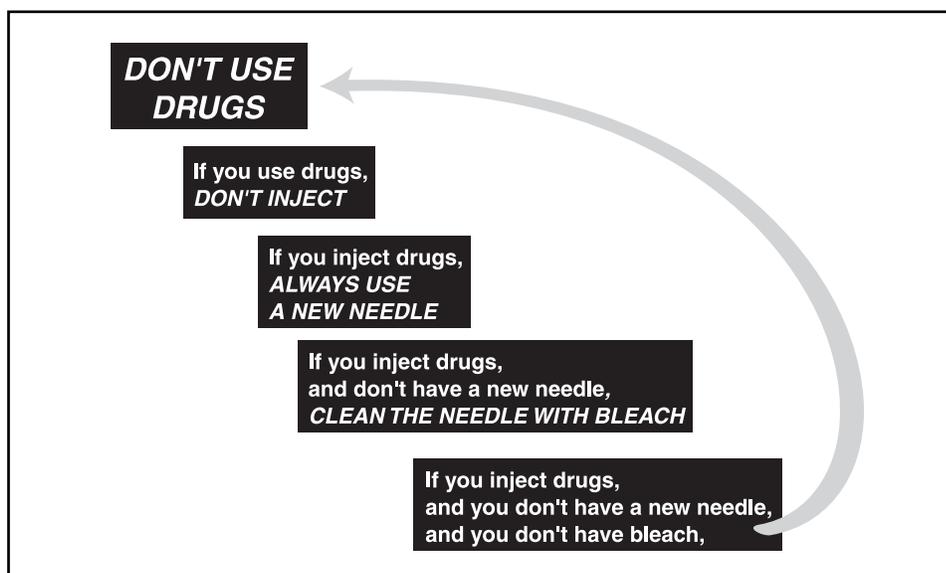
Additional tips:

1. Never dilute the bleach with water; diluted bleach is less effective for killing HIV.
2. Never re-use bleach or rinse water
3. Clean your needles before the blood inside them has a chance to dry; dried blood is harder to clean out of the needle.
4. Never put needle into the rinse water bottle; fill disposable cups with rinse water.
5. If you are unable to get bleach, do not inject drugs; other cleaning methods are not as effective at killing HIV.
6. Heating drug solution in a cooker for at least 15 seconds may also help to inactivate HIV.

Review

Let's review what we've covered so far. We talked about the harm caused by drug use, and the difference between harm prevention and harm reduction. We focused on the medical harm of injection drug use, and the reasons why someone who is already HIV positive should C-A-R-E about not sharing needles or "works". (C=compromised immune system; A=altruism; R=reinfection; E=evidence that HIV can live in a syringe for at least 4 weeks). We went over the ABCs of harm reduction (A=Abstinence—the **only** way to **prevent** or **avoid** harm is abstinence. The next best way to **reduce** the medical harm of injection drug use is B=buy or obtain new needles—never share; always using a new needle. The third best way to **reduce** the medical harm of injection drug use is C=Clean your needle/syringe with full-strength household bleach).

Remember, to **prevent** harm...don't use drugs. To **reduce** harm...if you use drugs, don't inject. If you inject drugs, always use a new needle. If you inject drugs and don't have a new needle, clean your needle properly with full-strength household bleach. If you inject drugs, don't have a new needle, and don't have bleach, **don't use drugs.**



Practice Exercise: Cleaning a Needle/Syringe with Bleach

DO NOT DO THIS EXERCISE ALONE. DO IT WITH YOUR COUNSELOR OR WITH A NON-DRUG USER. Following the steps for cleaning described earlier (the ABC's of harm reduction), practice cleaning a needle/syringe. You will need the following materials:

- 1 cc needle/syringe
- Cup containing full-strength household bleach
- Cup containing clean water for rinsing
- Empty cups (for disposal of bleach and water).

Repeat your practice until you feel comfortable with the procedure. If you still have any doubt about the risk of contamination if you don't clean your needle correctly, you can try the following demonstration:

1. Place a few drops of red food coloring in a cup of water. This will serve as the infected blood source of Drug User No.1.
2. Draw the "blood" into a syringe as if Drug User No. 1 were booting; notice the red liquid in the syringe—pretend this is No. 1's blood mixed with drug.
3. Squeeze the "blood" out of the syringe into a cup as if Drug User No. 1 was injecting the mixture. The syringe is now empty.
4. The needle and syringe are then shared. The next person sees no blood. Draw water into the syringe, as if it were the drug for the next user.

5. Squeeze the liquid onto a sheet of white paper. The pink stain indicating residual “blood” in the syringe. This shows that Drug User No. 2 is injecting blood from Drug User No. 1.

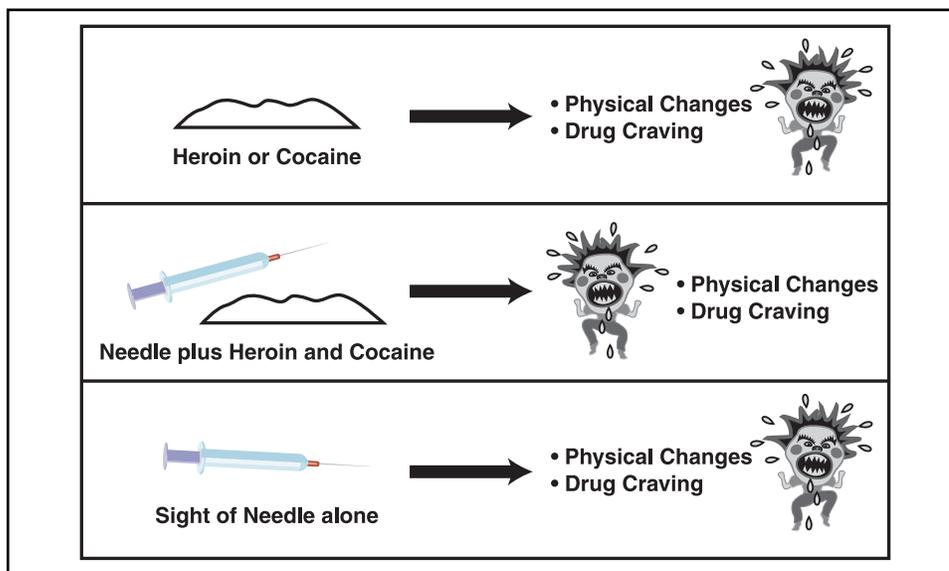
Seeing or handling drug paraphernalia can result in drug craving and can lead to relapse. It is therefore essential that you learn how to cope with craving without using drugs.

How to Handle Craving Associated with the Sight of Needles/Syringes

Just imagine that you are on a diet. You’re driving down the street having a good day, proud of your weight loss, when you spot the golden arches. Imagine you are a McDonald’s fan. Your mouth starts to water (salivate) and your desire for a cheeseburger and fries becomes very strong.

- Are you salivating because you are weak?
- Does the fact that you are salivating mean that your diet is doomed to failure?

The answer is no, of course not. The mere symbol for the type of food you enjoy has become a conditioned cue or trigger. Salivating in response to this food image is now completely involuntary. When you are on a diet, seeing the golden arches of McDonald's may feel very uncomfortable, but it doesn't need to result in ordering a cheeseburger, fries, and milkshake. Someone on a diet whose mouth waters when they see the golden arches can use this as a signal to engage in an activity not related to food. Similarly, needles can become conditioned cues or triggers for drug-addicted individuals. Through repeated pairing with cocaine or heroin, the needle/syringe has become associated with pleasure or relief from distress. In the process of becoming addicted or dependent on drugs, you probably developed a conditioned response to the sight of needles.



As shown in the illustration, just the sight of a needle can automatically produce physical and psychological changes, such as rapid heart rate, sweating, and a strong desire for the drug, or craving. Some people say that it feels like a craving monster has been unleashed within them and worry that they will have to use drugs to satisfy and quiet this monster. Feeling this way doesn't mean that you are weak or that your recovery is threatened. Certainly when you are trying to be abstinent, the sight of needles can be uncomfortable, but there is something you can do to reduce this discomfort. Remember that your conditioned craving response is particularly strong now because every time you injected drugs in the past and experienced the effects of the drug you were increasing the strength of the conditioned response. However, if you repeatedly see a needle and don't use drugs, the association between needles and the effects of drugs will gradually weaken and your craving will eventually be eliminated. This technique is actually used in some drug treatment programs and is called "exposure therapy." However, it does not mean that you should go out and expose yourself to drug paraphernalia with the goal of reducing your craving; that is too risky. When this technique is used in treatment, it is under controlled conditions and in a safe, drug-free environment. What it does mean is that you can use occasions such as this while you are in treatment to help you to reduce and manage your craving, rather than using it as an excuse to use drugs. You can also use the experience of craving as a warning signal that you are potentially entering a high risk situation, and that you therefore need to do something else, such as engage in a non-drug-related activity.



Starve, don't feed, the craving monster! Feeding your craving monster by using drugs just makes the craving monster that much fatter and hungrier. However, as the illustration shows, every time you crave drugs, but don't use

drugs, you starve the craving monster. Each time it will gradually decrease in size until it vanishes altogether. Furthermore, if you engage in a non-drug-related activity instead of feeding the craving monster, you will not only starve off the craving monster, but you will also increase your ability to cope with other triggers for drug use. For some people it may take many years to completely eliminate the craving monster, but in the meantime, you can tame it. Remember that just because it rears his ugly head from time to time, this does not mean that you are weak, or that your recovery is doomed to failure. In other chapters we will describe various ways to manage craving. We also end each chapter with a relaxation exercise because research has shown that drug addicted individuals who can learn how to reduce their craving in response to seeing and handling needles and other drug paraphernalia by using relaxation strategies are more likely to be successful in their recovery than individuals who cannot use relaxation to reduce their craving. Shortly, you will have the opportunity to see how well you can use relaxation to manage craving.

We began this chapter by considering all the harms caused by drug use. Does using new or bleach-cleaned needles reduce all the harms caused by drug use?

The answer is “**No.**”

THE GOOD NEWS

If you inject drugs, always using a new or bleach-cleaned needle will reduce the risk of HIV infection and reinfection

Reduce

↓

Medical Harm

THE BAD NEWS

It will not reduce other harm caused by drug use

Financial Harm

Legal Harm

Emotional Harm

Family/Social Harm

Using new or bleach-cleaned needles will help reduce your harm of becoming reinfected with HIV or other blood-borne infections and will reduce the possibility that you will transmit HIV or other infections to others. However, it will not reduce the legal, emotional, social, or financial harm caused by drug use. Nor will it prevent all medical harm. For example, injection drug use can result in abscesses or endocarditis if the site to be injected (the skin

itself) is not clean. You should therefore always clean the injection site with an alcohol wipe before injecting. This can help prevent endocarditis and abscesses.

Remember, the only way to prevent all harm is abstinence.

Quiz

1. The *best* way to protect yourself from the harm of injection drug use is:

- a. abstinence—don't inject drugs
- b. clean your needle with boiling water
- c. share needles only with friends
- d. none of the above

2. To reduce the harm of injection drug use you should:

- a. always use new needles
- b. if no new needle, clean the needle with bleach
- c. never share needles or works
- d. all of the above

3. Someone who is infected with the HIV virus could possibly become reinfected with a mutation of the HIV virus that does not respond to treatment.

- a. True
- b. False

4. When cleaning a needle with bleach, you should leave the bleach in the syringe for *at least*:

- a. 5 seconds
- b. 10 seconds
- c. 30 seconds
- d. 10 minutes

5. Craving in response to seeing a needle, syringe, or other "works":

- a. is an automatic conditioned response
- b. is a signal to engage in a non-drug-using activity
- c. will decrease over time if you stop injecting drugs
- d. all of the above

Practice Exercise: Stress Management/Relaxation

We recommend that you conclude each chapter by doing a ten-minute relaxation exercise. Use this time to practice meditation or deep breathing, or to play an audiotaped relaxation or visualization technique. Dim the lights, get comfortable in your chair, uncross your legs, and sit quietly with your eyes closed. Remember that learning to relax is a skill that takes practice, so if you feel restless at first, just remind yourself that this is a ten-minute gift of quiet time that you give to yourself. With practice, you can use meditation and relaxation in many areas of your life. For example, in this chapter we talked craving in response to seeing needles and works. So you can use this time to reduce any conditioned drug craving that you may have experienced due to the topic of this chapter. Before you begin your relaxation session, rate any craving that you may currently be experiencing from 0 (not at all) to 10 (the most intense it has ever been). Do that now. Then after the relaxation, you can rate your craving again to see how well you were able to reduce your craving. If you are still experiencing craving after the relaxation exercise you need to identify alternative ways to reduce your craving so that you do not do anything that will risk your recovery. Additional craving reduction techniques to consider if you are still experiencing craving at the conclusion of the relaxation exercise are:

1. Call NA sponsor
2. Go to NA meeting
3. Call a non-drug-using family member
4. Plan to engage in non-drug-related activity
5. Make a commitment to "ride out" the wave of craving for at least 15 minutes.
6. Remind self of the benefits of not using drugs and the negative consequences of using.

