



# The ABCs of Reducing Harm: Principles and Safety

Meeting people where they are allows you to prioritize their safety and build bridges that connect them to the resources they need.

**Disclaimer:** This fact sheet is intended to provide helpful tips for supportive recovery operators. For information on registration and operational requirements, please visit [Assisted Living in BC](#).

## Introduction

Policies, programs, and interventions can reduce the potential harms or negative effects of Substance Use Disorder (SUD). This requires working with people who use substances without judging, mistreating, or pressuring them so we can minimize any barriers to getting support and keeping the person safe.



## Key words and definitions

**Non-judgmental approach:** A way of providing care, support and information to people in which our personal opinions, biases, or moral standards (right/wrong) do not interfere with how they are treated.

**Safety:** Minimizing the risk of accidents, injuries, or harmful events. In a health setting, this involves taking measures and actions to protect the well-being of people.

## What does reducing harm mean?

- **Reducing harm means understanding** that not everyone can or wants to stop using substances at any given time, but risks can be decreased to support their safety. For example, providing clean injection supplies can greatly reduce the chance of certain infections.
- **We all have the same rights** to healthcare. Using substances does not make a person bad or undeserving of dignity and respectful treatment.
- **Ensuring the safety of all residents** is just as important as supporting residents who choose to stop using substances.
- **Immediate safety needs come first.** Increasing safety (including safe substance use) is a success as it protects life and makes recovery possible.

Common approaches to reducing harm include needle exchange programs, supervised consumption sites, and drug testing services. Since many people experience SUD as a relapsing condition, these programs are important for harm prevention and early intervention, complementing SUD treatment and recovery services.

## Does reducing harm really save lives?

Evidence has shown that reducing harm to people who use substances reduces the risk of potential accidents, injuries, infections, and other harms (including death). Programs that use this approach have been linked to:

- **Fewer overdoses:** People who use drug testing services at supervised sites are 10 times more likely to reduce their doses if fentanyl is detected and are 25% less likely to overdose. Early results in a study on supervised consumption sites in Vancouver showed no overdose deaths among participants.
- **Safer public spaces:** Early results from the same study on supervised consumption sites in Vancouver showed a reduction in the number of public injections in the nearby areas.
- **Safer indoor spaces:** Most overdoses happen indoors among men aged 40-59 who are using alone. Virtual overdose monitoring services such as LifeguardConnect overcome stigma-related barriers to reduce harm among this population.
- **Increased engagement with the healthcare system:** Participation in programs and services that reduce harm can motivate and support people who use substances to seek addiction treatment.
- **Increased protection against infections:** Needle exchange programs have been shown to significantly reduce the chances of contracting HIV and hepatitis C. Needle exchange programs have been shown to reduce the risk of contracting HIV for people who use substances by as much as 50 to 80%.



### Summary

- ✓ Reducing the risks of substance use helps to keep people safe from a variety of harmful consequences.
- ✓ Reducing harm follows principles of respect, dignity, and a non-judgmental approach towards people who use substances.
- ✓ Programs that reduce harm are supported by research and scientific evidence.

To learn more, visit the [Tools and Resources - Province of British Columbia \(gov.bc.ca\)](https://www2.gov.bc.ca) and scroll down to the Fact Sheets section.



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