

Tips for Talking with People Who Use Drugs

Opioid overdose is a serious medical emergency.

Encourage clients to call 911 for an opioid overdose, even if Naloxone has been administered. Naloxone is short acting and overdose can return once this medication wears off.

Be Aware of Your Language

Stigma is a major barrier to individuals seeking help. The words we use often contribute to this stigma. You can have a positive impact by using people first language. For example, instead of “addict”, “junkie”, or “user”, use wording such as “people who use drugs”.

Avoid using words like “potent”, “strong” or “more powerful” when talking about drugs. Such terms could result in an increase in people seeking out the drug for a better high. Alternatives like “more toxic”, “lethal” and “deadly” imply harm and are better word choices.

Use a harm reduction approach

Recognize that abstinence is not the goal of many people who use drugs. Support clients “where they are at”.

Review signs of an opioid overdose



Blue Lips,
Nails, Or Skin



Limp Body



Doesn't Respond
To Shouting



Pinpoint Pupils



Soft/No Breath
Or Snoring



Cold, Clammy Skin

Discuss harm reduction strategies:

- Carry a naloxone kit. Naloxone is available for free at most local pharmacies and at the Grey Bruce Health Unit.
- Avoid using alone. When using with someone else, avoid using at the same time.
- Know your tolerance. If using after a period of not using – use less.
- Avoid mixing drugs. Mixing drugs, including alcohol, increases the risk of overdose.
- Test a small amount at first and go slowly.
- Use new supplies and sharps containers, available through Public Health and community needle syringe program sites.
- Avoid sharing supplies; sharing supplies increases the risk of getting a blood borne infection such as HIV and Hepatitis C.

For those seeking help for substance use provide positive reinforcement and offer:

ConnexOntario: 1-866-531-2600 or RAAM Clinic: 519-376-3999

Seek support from colleagues or Employee Assistance Program if you are experiencing substance use issues or need to debrief about challenging situations.

“Harm Reduction keeps people alive to make a different choice, on a different day.”

Dr. Bernie Pauly, Scientist, December 19, 2016

