

# Gay Men, Drugs and Alcohol

## Gay Men’s Health Fact Sheet Series

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People use substances such as drugs and alcohol for a variety of different reasons. Much of our society has accepted forms of substance use like wine, beer, tobacco and coffee, while rejecting the use of substances such as marijuana, cocaine or heroin. Throughout history, humankind has used different substances to alter mental states in order to heighten creative or spiritual insight, to relieve pain, to stimulate appetite, to celebrate, or to relax.

Scientific studies have shown that gay men have higher rates of drug and alcohol use than the general population. Gay men are also more likely to smoke cigarettes than the average Canadian male. Gay men have a history of using drugs (both prescription and street drugs) and alcohol to dull the pain of being the target of homophobic violence and aggression, to alleviate the anxiety of meeting people in social environments, and to get rid of the shame and stigma attached to gay sexuality by mainstream cultures. Keep in mind that street drugs can be tainted or impure and therefore may be dangerous. If you use street drugs, try to buy from a dealer known for selling quality drugs. If you are not sure about the quality of the substance, play it safe and don’t take it or do so only with a friend around in case something goes wrong.

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### Sex, Drugs and ... STIs

A common theme in many studies is the link between sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and drug and alcohol use. Some gay men find it is easier to initiate sexual play after having a drink. This makes some sense, as the effect of the alcohol helps to make one feel relaxed and less inhibited. But when too high or too drunk, inhibitions completely go out the window. Some drugs can cause the anus to dry out which increases the likelihood of tears in the anal tissue. Unprotected anal sex after, or while using drugs or alcohol, is one way many gay men become infected with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Be prepared by always having a supply of condoms and lube on hand.

### What is Harm Reduction?

Harm reduction is a way of risk management. By learning about ways to reduce harms related to activities involving risk, using drugs for example, people can empower themselves to make informed choices. Harm reduction recognizes that even though 100% abstinence isn’t possible for everyone in every situation, people can still make positive choices regarding their health. Harm reduction can be used in any situation where there are varying degrees of risk. It is most often associated with recreational drug use and more recently with sex practices.

Although slogans such as “Just say no” and “Condoms, every time” have good

intentions, they are hard rules to follow. They are based on a goal of 100% success and this is only achieved if the advice is followed 100% of the time - there is no room for error. A harm reduction philosophy accepts the goal of 100% abstinence as just one of the many possible goals, rather than the only goal. It accepts the imperfection of human nature and offers a range of goals with different levels of risk.

### **C.A.G.E.**

Not all drug or alcohol use leads to addiction. This short quiz can help identify a possible problem with drugs or alcohol? It's called the CAGE gauge. The Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) Substance Use Counselling and Education team in New York City use it to help gay men self-assess issues around drug or alcohol use.

C - for Cutting Down - Have you tried to cut down your consumption at some point? You probably would only have made a conscious effort to reduce your consumption if your drinking or drugging was an issue.

A - for Annoyed - Do you get irritated when people comment or confront you about your drug or alcohol use?

G - for Guilty - Do you feel guilty about something you've done, or haven't done, as the result of drug or alcohol use? Does this happen a lot for you?

E - for Eye Opener - In order to keep you moving along, do you need a little of the drug or drink in question to start your

day, or to "revive" you in the evening before going out to see friends?

If the answer to any of these questions is 'yes', then your current drug or alcohol use is a concern.

### **Things to Think About**

- Get informed and get help. Find out more about drug or alcohol use and abuse by talking with a drug and alcohol counsellor or a mental health worker.
- Talk about it with friends, family and loved ones. Tough questions can come up when facing drug and alcohol dependency so it helps to build a network of support while considering the healthiest options.
- Finally, have realistic expectations. Don't expect to change everything overnight.

There are many resources available for those considering changing or stopping drug or alcohol use. They range from abstinence-based, principle-guided 12-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, to drug and alcohol treatment centres using traditional healing principles, to talk therapy with drug and alcohol counsellors. There are travelling workshops, self-help books and laser and acupuncture treatments to help smokers curb their habit. If you are looking to make changes to substance use, be sure to keep well-being and health a priority and seek the guidance of a professional.