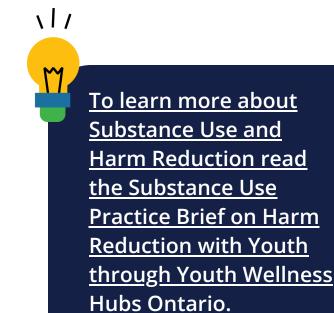
Harm Reduction & Youth Substance Use





Harm Reduction is an evidence-based, public health approach that applies to several health domains such as safe operation of vehicles, safer sexual health practices, injury prevention, infectious disease control, and substance use.^{1,2} In the context of substance use, **harm reduction aims** to decrease the negative health, social, and economic consequences of substance use-related harms; this approach recognizes that the spectrum of harm reduction also includes abstinence-based goals.²

A harm reduction approach is particularly relevant for youth, as it acknowledges the realities of adolescence, which often involves a period defined by rapid neurodevelopment, curiosity, risk-taking, experimentation with substances, skepticism of authority, and other behaviours that can carry risks.^{3,4}





Examples of substance use related harm reduction practices, programs, and services:



Education and Support Services

- Substance use and safer use education
- Counselling and peer support



Overdose Prevention

- Overdose prevention (e.g., naloxone)
- Needle and syringe exchange programs
- Substance checking services



Supervised and Regulated Use

- Supervised consumption sites
- Virtual supervision for substance users



Medical Interventions

- Opioid Agonist Therapy (e.g., buprenorphine)
- Community and hospital-based withdrawal management services

Summary of Evidence

- Rising mental health challenges and the growing threat of a toxic drug supply underscore the urgent need for integrated, youth-focused harm reduction and mental health support.4,5,6
- Many harm reduction programs and interventions have been studied, developed and funded in the context of adults with less focus on the youth population.⁷
- Studies have showcased the significant effects of harm reduction education and interventions in reducing substance use and harm in youth.8



Practice-based Harm Reduction considerations when working with youth

Learn about more practice-based considerations with examples by reading the full practice brief using the QR code

- Use a patient-centred approach that acknowledges the perceived benefits of substance use and provides harm reduction strategies that align with the individual's goals.⁹
- Recognize that **not all adolescents who use substances have a substance use disorder** and treatment may not always be indicated.⁹
- Consider **cultural**, **social**, **and geographical differences** in how youth use substances and develop harm reduction strategies to ensure programming is relevant.⁵
- Utilize intentional, person-first, and community-informed language to reduce stigma, build rapport, and balance power dynamics. 10
- Clearly explain the **potential risks** of substance use and how to reduce those risks, while also promoting open communication.⁹
- Be knowledgeable about harm reduction supplies and practices, as well as local laws about providing harm reduction supplies to youth.9

References

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