

Substance Use and HIV

(updated January 2023)



Substance Use and HIV

This educational packet is a curated compilation of resources about substance use and HIV.

The contents of this packet are listed below:

- HIV and Substance Use (HIVinfo)
- El VIH y el Uso de Sustancias (HIVinfo)
- Alcohol and Drug Use (HIV.gov)
- Alcohol and HIV Risk (HIV.gov)
- Substance Use and HIV Risk (HIV.gov)
- Drugs, Alcohol, and HIV (Department of Veterans Affairs)

You may wish to customize this packet to meet the needs or interests of particular groups, such as event participants, providers, patients, clients, or the general public. So please feel free to distribute all or part of this document as either a printout or PDF.

HIV and Substance Use

 hivinfo.nih.gov/understanding-hiv/fact-sheets/hiv-and-substance-use

Living with HIV

Last Reviewed: August 13, 2021

Key Points

- Substance use refers to the use of drugs and alcohol and includes the misuse of prescription drugs and over-the-counter medicines.
- Substance use can lead to risky behaviors that increase the chance of getting HIV or passing it onto others (called HIV transmission). Risky behaviors include having sex without a condom and sharing needles. For example, a person using drugs or alcohol may have sex without a condom or share needles when injecting drugs.
- Substance use can harm the health of a person with HIV. Specifically, drug and alcohol use can weaken the immune system and damage the liver.
- People with HIV take a combination of HIV medicines (called an HIV treatment regimen) every day to stay healthy. Substance use can make it hard to focus and stick to a daily HIV treatment regimen. Skipping HIV medicines allows HIV to multiply and damage the immune system.
- Drug interactions between HIV medicines and recreational drugs can increase the risk of dangerous side effects.

What is the connection between HIV and substance use?

Substance use is the use of drugs and alcohol and includes the misuse of prescription drugs and over-the-counter medicines. Substance use is related to HIV in the following ways:

- Use of alcohol and recreational drugs can lead to risky behaviors that increase the chances of getting HIV or passing it on to others (called HIV transmission). Recreational drugs include injection and non-injection drugs, such as opioids (including heroin), methamphetamine (meth), crack cocaine, and inhalants (poppers). Some prescription drugs and over-the-counter medicines contain stimulants that when used inappropriately can also lead to risky behaviors.
- Substance use can harm the health of a person with HIV. Specifically, drug and alcohol use can weaken the immune system and damage the liver.

How does substance use increase the risk of getting HIV?

Drugs and alcohol use affect the brain, making it hard to think clearly. This includes the use of prescription drugs and over-the-counter medicines for purposes other than prescribed, in excessive amounts, or over a longer period than was intended. People using drugs or alcohol may make poor decisions and take risks.

Some risky behaviors can increase the risk of getting or transmitting HIV. For example, a person using drugs or alcohol may have sex without a condom or share needles when injecting drugs.

In the United States, HIV is spread mainly by:

- Having anal or vaginal sex with someone who has HIV without using a condom or taking medicines to prevent or treat HIV
- Sharing injection drug equipment (works), such as needles, with someone who has HIV

How can substance use affect a person with HIV?

Substance use can harm the health of a person with HIV in several ways.

Drugs and alcohol can weaken the immune system.

HIV damages the immune system, making it harder for the body to fight infections and certain cancers. Drug or alcohol use can further damage the immune system and cause HIV infection to worsen.

Drugs and alcohol can damage the liver and cause liver disease.

One of the main functions of the liver is to remove harmful substances (toxins) from the blood. Toxins are produced when the liver breaks down the chemicals in drugs or alcohol.

Drug and alcohol use can damage the liver, making it work harder to remove toxins from the body. The buildup of toxins can weaken the body and lead to liver disease.

Some recreational drugs can interact with HIV medicines.

Drug interactions between HIV medicines and recreational drugs can increase the risk of dangerous side effects. For example, overdoses due to interactions between some HIV medicines and drugs, such as ecstasy (MDMA) or GHB, have been reported.

Drug and alcohol use can make it hard to take HIV medicines every day.

People with HIV take a combination of HIV medicines (called an HIV treatment regimen) every day to stay healthy. Drug or alcohol use can make it hard to focus and stick to a daily HIV treatment regimen. Skipping HIV medicines allows HIV to multiply and damage the immune system.

If you use drugs or drink alcohol, take the following steps to protect your health.

If you use drugs or alcohol:

- Do not have sex if you are high.
- Use a condom correctly every time you have sex. Read this fact sheet from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on [how to use condoms correctly](#).

If you drink alcohol:

- Drink in moderation. Moderate drinking is up to 1 drink per day for women and up to 2 drinks per day for men. One drink is a 12-oz bottle of beer, a 5-oz glass of wine, or a shot of liquor.
- Visit [Rethinking Drinking](#), a website from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). This website can help you evaluate your drinking habits and consider how alcohol may be affecting your health.

If you inject drugs:

- Use only new, sterile needles and drug injection equipment (works) each time you inject.
- Never share needles and works.
- Visit CDC's webpage on [how to protect yourself if you inject drugs](#) for more information on how to reduce the risk of getting or transmitting HIV from injection drug use.

Therapy, medicines, and other methods are also available to help you stop or cut down on drinking alcohol or using drugs. You can talk with a counselor or a health care provider about options that might be right for you. To find a substance abuse treatment center near you, visit the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's [treatment locator](#) or call 1-800-662-HELP (4357).

Provided in collaboration with NIH's Office of AIDS Research.

El VIH y el uso de sustancias

 hivinfo.nih.gov/es/understanding-hiv/fact-sheets/el-vih-y-el-uso-de-sustancias

Última revisión: Agosto 13, 2021

Puntos importantes

- El uso de sustancias se refiere al uso de drogas y alcohol e incluye el uso indebido de medicamentos recetados y de venta libre.
- El uso de drogas y de alcohol puede conducir a patrones de comportamiento de riesgo que aumentan la posibilidad de contraer la infección por el VIH o de transmitírsela a otras personas (lo cual se llama transmisión del VIH). Los patrones de comportamiento de riesgo incluyen tener relaciones sexuales sin condón y compartir agujas. Por ejemplo, una persona que usa drogas o alcohol podría tener relaciones sexuales sin condón o compartir agujas para inyección de drogas.
- El uso de drogas y alcohol puede perjudicar la salud de una persona con el VIH. En particular, puede debilitar el sistema inmunitario y causar lesiones del hígado.
- Para mantenerse sanas, las personas con el VIH toman todos los días una combinación de medicamentos (llamada régimen de tratamiento contra el VIH). El uso de drogas o de alcohol puede dificultar el enfoque y el cumplimiento del régimen de tratamiento diario. La omisión de estos últimos permite que el virus se multiplique y cause daños al sistema inmunitario.
- Las interacciones medicamentosas entre los medicamentos antirretrovirales y las drogas recreativas pueden aumentar el riesgo de efectos secundarios peligrosos.

¿Qué relación existe entre la infección por el VIH y el uso de sustancias?

El uso de sustancias se refiere al uso de drogas y alcohol e incluye el uso indebido de medicamentos recetados y de venta libre. El uso de sustancias guarda relación con el VIH de las siguientes maneras:

- El uso de alcohol o de drogas recreativas puede conducir a patrones de comportamiento de riesgo que aumentan la posibilidad de contraer la infección por el VIH o de transmitírsela a otras personas (lo cual se llama transmisión del VIH). Las drogas recreativas comprenden productos inyectables y no inyectables, como opioides (tales como la heroína), metanfetamina, cocaína crack y sustancias inhalantes (sustancias estimulantes conocidas como *poppers*). Algunos medicamentos recetados y de venta libre contienen estimulantes que cuando se usan indebidamente también pueden dar origen a patrones de comportamiento de riesgo.

- El uso de drogas y alcohol puede perjudicar la salud de una persona con el VIH. En particular, puede debilitar el sistema inmunitario y causar lesiones del hígado.

¿Cómo aumenta el riesgo de infección por el VIH con el uso de sustancias?

Las drogas y el alcohol afectan el cerebro y hacen que la persona tenga dificultad para pensar con claridad. Esto incluye el uso de medicamentos recetados y de venta libre para fines distintos de los recetados, en cantidades excesivas y por un período más largo del previsto. Es posible que los usuarios de drogas o alcohol tomen malas decisiones y corran riesgos.

Algunos patrones de comportamiento de riesgo pueden aumentar la posibilidad de contraer o de transmitir la infección por el VIH. Por ejemplo, es posible que un usuario de drogas o de alcohol tenga relaciones sexuales sin condón o comparta agujas al inyectarse drogas.

En los Estados Unidos, la infección por el VIH se propaga sobre todo de las siguientes formas:

- Al tener relaciones sexuales por vía anal o vaginal con una persona seropositiva sin usar condón o sin tomar medicamentos para prevenir o tratar la infección por el VIH.
- Al compartir equipo (accesorios) para la inyección de drogas, como agujas, con una persona seropositiva.

¿Cómo puede el uso de sustancias afectar a una persona con el VIH?

El uso de drogas y de alcohol puede afectar la salud de una persona seropositiva de varias maneras.

Las drogas y el alcohol pueden debilitar el sistema inmunitario.

El VIH es perjudicial para el sistema inmunitario, le dificulta combatir las infecciones y ciertos tipos de cáncer. El uso de las drogas o del alcohol puede dañar aún más el sistema inmunitario y empeorar la infección por el VIH.

Las drogas y el alcohol pueden lesionar el hígado y causar enfermedad de ese órgano.

Una de las principales funciones del hígado es retirar las sustancias nocivas (toxinas) de la sangre. Se producen toxinas cuando el hígado descompone las sustancias químicas en las drogas o el alcohol.

El uso de drogas y alcohol puede causar lesiones del hígado, con lo cual éste tiene que trabajar más intensamente para retirar las toxinas del cuerpo. La acumulación de toxinas puede debilitar el cuerpo y conducir a enfermedad del hígado.

Algunas drogas recreativas pueden interactuar con los medicamentos contra el VIH.

Las interacciones medicamentosas entre los medicamentos antirretrovirales y las drogas recreativas pueden aumentar el riesgo de efectos secundarios peligrosos. Por ejemplo, se han reportado sobredosis debido a las interacciones entre algunos medicamentos antirretrovirales y las drogas como el éxtasis (MDMA) o el GHB.

El uso de drogas y alcohol puede dificultar tomar los medicamentos antirretrovirales todos los días. Para mantenerse sanas, las personas con el VIH toman todos los días una combinación de medicamentos (llamada régimen de tratamiento) contra el VIH. El uso de las drogas o del alcohol puede dificultar el enfoque y el cumplimiento del régimen de tratamiento diario. La omisión de esos medicamentos permite que el virus se multiplique y cause daños al sistema inmunitario.

Si usa drogas o toma alcohol, haga lo siguiente para proteger su salud.

Si usa drogas o alcohol:

- No tenga relaciones sexuales si está drogado.
- Si tiene relaciones sexuales, use un condón de la manera correcta cada vez. Lea esta hoja informativa de los Centros para el Control y la Prevención de Enfermedades (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC) sobre el modo correcto de usar los condones.

Si toma alcohol:

- Beba con moderación. Eso significa tomar, como máximo, una bebida diaria en el caso de las mujeres y hasta dos bebidas diarias en el caso de los hombres. Una bebida es una botella de cerveza, una copa de vino o un trago de licor.
- Lea el folleto, titulado Piénselo antes de beber: El alcohol y su salud, publicado por el Instituto Nacional sobre el Abuso del Alcohol y el Alcoholismo (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, NIAAA). Este folleto puede ayudarle a evaluar sus hábitos de consumo de bebidas alcohólicas y a analizar cómo pueden afectarles la salud.

Si se inyecta drogas:

- Use solamente agujas y equipo (accesorios) de inyección de drogas nuevos y esterilizados cada vez que se inyecte.

- Nunca comparta agujas ni accesorios.
- Visite la página web de los CDC que trata de la forma de protegerse si se inyecta drogas para más obtener información sobre cómo reducir el riesgo de contraer o de transmitir la infección por el VIH durante el uso de drogas inyectables.

También se dispone de tratamiento, medicamentos y otros métodos para ayudarle a dejar o reducir el consumo de bebidas alcohólicas o el uso de drogas. Usted puede hablar con un asesor o con un proveedor de atención de salud sobre las opciones apropiadas para usted. Para buscar un centro de tratamiento del abuso de sustancias en su comunidad, visite el localizador de tratamiento de la Administración de Servicios de Abuso de Sustancias y Salud Mental o llame al 1-800-662-HELP (4357).

Véase también una colección de enlaces y recursos sobre el VIH en HIV Source.

La hoja informativa precedente se basa en la correspondiente en inglés.

Proporcionado en colaboración con la Oficina de Investigación del SIDA de los NIH

Alcohol and Drug Use

 hiv.gov/hiv-basics/staying-in-hiv-care/other-related-health-issues/alcohol-and-drug-use

May 15, 2017

Alcohol and drug use can be harmful to your health and get out of hand for some people. Modest use of alcohol can help your heart health in some circumstances, but it can also lead to long-term effects that are harmful and reduce your ability to fight off HIV. Different drugs have different effects on the body, and they can affect your judgement, mental health, and physical health differently. The use of illegal drugs presents multiple risks to the health of people living with HIV including harmful effects on the body and the risks associated with injection drug use, and risks associated with sexual transmission of HIV.

How Can Alcohol, Drug Use, and HIV Affect Your Health?

Alcohol and drug use, abuse, and dependence may damage your body and brain, and drug overdoses can cause death. This damage to your body and brain can negatively affect your health and well-being in many ways. These are just some examples.

- Physical effects:
 - Drinking too much can damage your brain, liver, and immune system. Chronic drinkers with HIV may be at greater risk for disease progression than those who drink very little or not at all ([read more](#)).
 - Methamphetamines can lead to brain, liver, and kidney damage, impaired blood circulation, significant weight loss, and tooth decay.
 - Drugs like cocaine and heroin can seriously damage your respiratory and circulatory systems.
 - Methamphetamines and cocaine can negatively affect your immune system, making it easier for your body to get an infection.
 - Some substances interfere with HIV medicines that are part of an overall treatment plan.

- Other effects:
 - The after-effects of a drug or alcohol “high” can create feelings of depression, exhaustion, pain, and/or irritability.
 - Getting high may cause you to forget to take your HIV medicines or forget to make and keep doctor and clinic appointments.
 - Using drugs can make it hard for you to maintain your house, job, relationships, and social supports—all of which are important for your well-being.
 - If you inject drugs, you may be at increased risk for transmitting or getting HIV. You may also be at risk for other infections that are transmitted by blood such as hepatitis B and hepatitis C. Learn more about [reducing the risk from injecting drugs](#). Using drugs can make you more prone to risky practices, such as sharing needles or not using condoms. This increases the chance that you could transmit HIV or get a sexually transmitted disease (STD) that could make your infection worse.

How Can You Find Treatment or Support Programs?

Choosing to stop using drugs or alcohol is not easy, but it can be done. Quitting will improve your health, well-being, and relationships with others.

- Different types of substance use require different types of treatment. Based on your level of dependence, you may need medical treatment and/or psychological therapy to help you quit. Talk with your health care provider to explore treatment options that are specific to your type of substance use.
- Peer support and faith-based recovery groups may also help you manage substance use and dependence.

Support is available. Many organizations provide hotlines and guidance on substance abuse treatment options:

- Use the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) [Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator](#) to find alcohol and substance abuse treatment facilities and programs near you. Or call SAMHSA’s national helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357).
- Find treatment options for opioid abuse by specific drug or by state. Use SAMHSA’s [Opioid Treatment Program Directory](#) and [Buprenorphine Physician and Treatment Program Locator](#) for information you can use.

CDC offers more [information on substance abuse and treatment](#).

Alcohol and HIV Risk

 hiv.gov/hiv-basics/hiv-prevention/reducing-risk-from-alcohol-and-drug-use/alcohol-and-hiv-risk

How Can Alcohol Put You at Risk for Getting or Transmitting HIV?

Drinking alcohol, particularly binge drinking, affects your brain, making it hard to think clearly. When you're drunk, you may be more likely to make poor decisions that put you at risk for getting or transmitting HIV, such as having sex without medicine to prevent or treat HIV or without a condom.

You also may be more likely to have a harder time using a condom the right way, have more sexual partners, or use other drugs. Those behaviors can increase your risk of exposure to HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Or, if you have HIV, they can also increase your risk of transmitting HIV to others.

What Can You Do?

If you drink alcohol:

- Drink in moderation. Moderate drinking is up to 1 drink per day for women and up to 2 drinks per day for men. One drink is a 12-ounce bottle of beer, a 5-ounce glass of wine, or a shot of liquor.
- Visit Rethinking Drinking, a website from NIH's National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). This website can help you evaluate your drinking habits and consider how alcohol may be affecting your health.
- Don't have sex if you're drunk or high from other drugs.
- If you are HIV-negative, talk to your health care provider about pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). PrEP is medicine people at risk for HIV take to prevent getting HIV from sex or injection drug use. PrEP can stop HIV from taking hold and spreading throughout your body. PrEP must be taken as prescribed and alcohol use can make it hard to stick to an HIV regimen. Be open and honest about your alcohol use so you and your doctor can develop a plan for you to stick to your HIV medicine.
- If you aren't taking PrEP as prescribed, condom use is also important to help prevent HIV. And, since PrEP only protects against HIV, condom use is still important for the protection against other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Read this fact sheet from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on how to use condoms correctly. You can also consider sexual activities that are lower risk for HIV than anal or vaginal sex (like oral sex).

- If you have HIV, take HIV medicine (called antiretroviral therapy or ART) as prescribed. People with HIV who take HIV medication as prescribed and get and keep an undetectable viral load **can live long and healthy lives** and **will not transmit HIV to their HIV-negative partners through sex**.

Need help?

- If you feel you are drinking too much, too fast, or too often, therapy and other methods are available to help you stop or cut down on your alcohol use (if you have a problem). Talk with a counselor, doctor, or other health care provider about options that might be right for you.
- The National Institute on Alcohol Use and Alcoholism (NIAAA) offers an [Alcohol Treatment Navigator](#). This online tool helps you find the right treatment for you—and near you. It guides you through a step-by-step process to finding a highly qualified professional treatment provider.
- You can also use the [SAMHSA Behavioral Health Treatment Locator](#) or call 1-800-662-HELP (4357). Open 24/7.

Staying Healthy

If you have HIV, alcohol use can be harmful to your brain and body and affect your ability to stick to your HIV treatment. Learn about the [health effects of alcohol and other drug use](#) and how to access alcohol treatment programs if you need them.

Substance Use and HIV Risk

 [hiv.gov/hiv-basics/hiv-prevention/reducing-risk-from-alcohol-and-drug-use/substance-use-and-hiv-risk](https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/hiv-prevention/reducing-risk-from-alcohol-and-drug-use/substance-use-and-hiv-risk)

Content Source: HIV.gov Date last updated: August 27, 2018

August 27, 2018

How Can Using Drugs Put Me at Risk for Getting or Transmitting HIV?

Using drugs affects your brain, alters your judgment, and lowers your inhibitions. When you're high, you may be more likely to make poor decisions that put you at risk for getting or transmitting HIV, such as having sex without a condom, have a hard time using a condom the right way every time you have sex, have more sexual partners, or use other drugs. These behaviors can increase your risk of exposure to HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Or, if you have HIV, they can increase your risk of spreading HIV to others.

And if you inject drugs, you are at risk for getting or transmitting HIV and hepatitis B and C if you share needles or equipment (or "works") used to prepare drugs, like cotton, cookers, and water. This is because the needles or works may have blood in them, and blood can carry HIV. You should not share needles or works for injecting silicone, hormones, or steroids for the same reason.

Here are some commonly used substances and their link to HIV risk:

1. **Alcohol.** Excessive alcohol consumption, notably binge drinking, can be an important risk factor for HIV because it is linked to risky sexual behaviors and, among people living with HIV, can hurt treatment outcomes.
2. **Opioids.** Opioids, a class of drugs that reduce pain, include both prescription drugs and heroin. They are associated with HIV risk behaviors such as needle sharing when infected and risky sexual behaviors, and have been linked to outbreaks of HIV and viral hepatitis. People who are addicted to opioids are also at risk of turning to other ways to get the drug, including trading sex for drugs or money, which increases HIV risk.
3. **Methamphetamine.** "Meth" is linked to risky sexual behaviors, such as having more sexual partners or sex without a condom, that place people at greater risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Meth can be injected, which also increases HIV risk if people share needles and other injection equipment.
4. **Crack cocaine.** Crack cocaine is a stimulant that can create a cycle in which people quickly exhaust their resources and may engage in behaviors to obtain the drug that increase their HIV risk.
5. **Inhalants.** Use of amyl nitrite ("poppers") has long been linked to risky sexual behaviors, illegal drug use, and sexually transmitted diseases among gay and bisexual men.

Therapy, medicines, and other methods are available to help you stop or cut down on drinking or using drugs. Talk with a counselor, doctor, or other health care provider about options that might be right for you. To find a substance abuse treatment center near you, visit [SAMHSA's treatment locator](#) or call 1-800-662-HELP (4357).

How Can You Prevent Getting or Transmitting HIV from Injection Drug Use?

Your risk is high for getting or transmitting HIV and hepatitis B and C if you share needles or equipment (or "works") used to prepare drugs, like cotton, cookers, and water. This is because the needles or works may have blood in them, and blood can carry HIV.

If you inject drugs, you are also at risk of getting HIV (and other sexually transmitted diseases) because you may be more likely to take risks with sex when you are high.

The best way to lower your chances of getting HIV is to stop injecting drugs. You may need help to stop or cut down using drugs, but there are many resources available to help you. To find a substance abuse treatment center near you, visit [SAMHSA's treatment locator](#) or call 1-800-662-HELP (4357).

If you keep injecting drugs, here are some ways to lower your risk for getting HIV and other infections:

- Use only new, sterile needles and works each time you inject. Many communities have needle exchange programs where you can get new needles and works, and some pharmacies may sell needles without a prescription.
- Never share needles or works.
- Clean used needles with bleach only when you can't get new ones. Bleaching a needle may reduce the risk of HIV but doesn't eliminate it.
- Use sterile water to fix drugs.
- Clean your skin with a new alcohol swab before you inject.
- Be careful not to get someone else's blood on your hands or your needle or works.
- Dispose of needles safely after one use. Use a sharps container, or keep used needles away from other people.
- Get tested for HIV at least once a year
- Ask your doctor about taking daily medicine to prevent HIV called [pre-exposure prophylaxis](#) (PrEP).
- If you think you've been exposed to HIV within the last 3 days, ask a health care provider about [post-exposure prophylaxis](#) (PEP) right away. PEP can prevent HIV, but it must be started within 72 hours.
- Don't have sex if you're high. If you do have sex, make sure to protect yourself and your partner by [using a condom the right way](#) every time or by using other effective methods.



What Are Syringe Services Programs?

Many communities have syringe services programs, also called syringe exchange programs or needle exchange programs. SSPs are places where injection drug users can get new needles and works, along with other services such as help with stopping substance abuse; testing and, if needed, linkage to treatment for HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C; and education on what to do for an overdose. SSPs have been demonstrated to be an effective component of a comprehensive approach to prevent HIV and viral hepatitis among people who inject drugs, while not increasing illegal drug use. Find one near you.

Staying Healthy

If you are living with HIV, substance use can be harmful to your brain and body and affect your ability to stick to your HIV treatment regimen. Learn about the health effects of alcohol and other substance use and how to access substance abuse treatment programs if you need them.

Drugs, Alcohol and HIV: Entire Lesson

Drugs and Alcohol: Overview

If you've just found out that you are HIV positive, you might be wondering what alcohol and other "recreational" drugs will do to your body. (Recreational drugs are drugs that aren't being used for medical purposes, such as cocaine, amphetamines, and pot; this also includes prescription medicines that are being used for pleasure.)

You may be wondering whether these drugs are bad for your immune system. And what about your HIV medications--can recreational drugs affect those?

Each person is different, and a lot depends on which drugs you use, how much you use, and how often you use them.

However, most experts would agree that, in large amounts, drugs and alcohol are bad for your immune system and your overall health. Remember, when you have HIV, your immune system is already weakened.

In this series, you can read about what alcohol and drugs can do to your overall health.

Drugs and Alcohol: Effects on your immune system

Drinking too much alcohol can weaken your immune system. A weaker immune system will have a harder time fighting off common infections (such as a cold), as well as HIV-related infections. A weaker immune system also increases the chance that you will experience more side effects from your HIV medications.

Smoking marijuana (pot) or any other drug irritates the lungs. You may be more likely to get serious lung infections, such as pneumonia.

Other common recreational drugs, such as cocaine or crystal methamphetamine ("meth," "speed"), can leave your body dehydrated and exhausted, as well as lead to skin irritation. All of these things can make it easier for you to get infections.

Alcohol and other drugs affect your liver the most. The liver rounds up waste from chemicals that you put in your body. Those chemicals include recreational drugs as well as prescription drugs, such as your HIV medications. A weaker liver means it is less efficient.

If you also have hepatitis C (or any other kind of hepatitis), your liver is already working very hard to fight the disease itself and deal with the strong drugs that you may be taking for your hepatitis treatment.

Drugs and Alcohol: Interactions with your HIV meds

HIV medications can be hard on your body. When you are taking these medications, it is important that your liver works as well as possible. The liver is responsible for getting rid of waste products from the medications.

When you are HIV positive, your body may react differently to alcohol and drugs. Many people find that it takes longer to recover from using pot, alcohol, or other recreational drugs than it did before they had HIV.

Remember that having HIV means a major change has taken place in your body. You may choose to use alcohol and drugs in moderation, but be sure to respect your body. Pay attention to what and how much you eat, drink, smoke, and take into your body.

Certain HIV medications can boost the level of recreational drugs in your system in unexpected and potentially dangerous ways. For example, amphetamines (such as crystal meth) can be present at 3 to 22 times their normal levels in the bloodstream when mixed with an HIV drug called ritonavir (Norvir). That's because ritonavir affects the body's ability to break down these other drugs.

If you are going to take a recreational drug while you are on HIV medication, it is better to start with a very low amount of the recreational drug (as low as 1/4 the normal amount) and allow time to see how it affects you before increasing the amount. Keep in mind that recreational drugs aren't regulated, so you never know exactly how much you are getting.

Although you may feel uncomfortable at first, you should tell your doctor what drugs you are using. That way, your doctor will know how the substances you are using affect your HIV drugs and your overall health.

Drugs, alcohol, and safer sex

Many drugs, including alcohol and methamphetamine, may affect your ability to make decisions.

Even if you take your HIV medications regularly and practice safer sex when you're not high, when you're under the influence of methamphetamine or other drugs you may be willing to take more risks. For example, you might not use a condom or take your HIV medications.

Alcohol also can affect the decisions you make about safer sex. For example, if you have too much to drink, you may not remember where you put the condoms, and decide simply not to use them. These are decisions you probably would not make if you were sober.

These actions put your partner at risk for HIV and put you at risk for other sexually transmitted diseases or for pregnancy.

Remember to take your HIV medications every day, and to keep condoms handy in places where you might have sex. Also, try to limit the amount of drugs you use or alcohol you drink if you know you are going to have sex.

HIV and injection drug use

Sharing a needle or any equipment when injecting drugs is dangerous for you and for your sharing partners. They could get HIV from you, and you could get another disease, such as hepatitis, from them.

The safest option is not to share. Use clean needles and syringes each time, and keep your own equipment to yourself. There are sterile syringe programs that can help provide clean needles. For more information on sterile syringe programs, please visit the [HIV.gov Website](http://HIV.gov)

Because of the dangers of injection drug use, the best way to lower your risk is to stop injecting drugs. If you need help to stop using drugs, please talk to your VA provider or visit maketheconnection.net

If you do inject drugs, follow these reminders:

- Never reuse or "share" syringes, water, or drug preparation equipment.
- Use only syringes obtained from a reliable source (such as pharmacies and needle or syringe services programs).
- Use a new, sterile syringe each time to prepare and inject drugs. If this is not possible, sterilize your syringe or disinfect your syringe and other equipment with bleach.
- If possible, use sterile water to prepare drugs; otherwise, use clean water from a reliable source (such as fresh tap water).
- Use a new or disinfected container ("cooker") and a new filter ("cotton") to prepare drugs.
- Clean the injection site with a new alcohol swab prior to injection.
- Safely dispose of syringes after one use.

Drugs and Alcohol: Points to remember

- Before you drink or use drugs, it is important to think about risks.
- If you would like to cut back on your use of alcohol or other drugs, talk to your VA provider about getting help and finding the treatment you need.