

Guidance for Heroin/Opioid Users around COVID-19

Adapted from Cheryl White and Russell Newcombe of 3D Research Info Sheet

PURPOSE

The following info sheet is meant to provide guidance for heroin/opioid users around safer use during the outbreak or potential outbreak of communicable diseases.

It's important to be aware and proactive to stay safe during an outbreak. Supplies of medicines are already being affected, doctors and hospitals are likely to become overwhelmed, drug services may close for some time, and illicit drugs may become scarce as dealers get sick (they may be at higher risk for getting and passing on COVID19). If current predictions of the coronavirus epidemic are right, you'll be glad you took advice and action sooner rather than later.

1. **Check** with your pharmacist if services may be changing – for instance, ask if larger supplies of take-home methadone will become available.
2. **Ensure** you have as many phone numbers for active dealers as you can. See below.
3. **Prepare** for involuntary withdrawal – stock up on symptom-specific meds and any opioid meds you can get.
4. **Be aware** of increased risk death, as breathing impaired by opioids will be worsened by Covid-19 infection.
5. **Smokers** of heroin and other drugs need to be aware Covid-19 infection will make it difficult to inhale smoke.
6. If you become **unable to smoke** heroin and you don't inject, this leaves 3 options:
 - a. **Snort it** - chop powder finely and sniff slowly (it works, but not well).
 - b. **UYB** - dissolve with citric or ascorbic acid, put in a syringe (with no needle!) and squirt it Up Your Bum.
 - c. **Swallow it** – this means the heroin will go via your liver BEFORE it reaches your brain, resulting in a morphine effect - but it stops withdrawals.

Harm Reduction Tips

A shorter/sharper version is being prepared by 3D Research (me and Russ) and will be posted shortly here and on Twitter.

1. **DON'T SHARE** pipes, bongs, vapes or joints, nasal tubes (for inhaling/snorting), and all injecting equipment (including sterilized water).
2. **STOCK UP** on your drugs of choice if you've got the money.
3. **ASK YOUR DOCTOR to get a 3 month take-home prescription.** If you are a client of drug substitution programs (ie: methadone maintenance/tapering, heroin, Suboxone/Bup, stimulants, marijuana etc.), and particularly if you have a pre-existing condition that makes you more vulnerable to infection. This means you don't have to go to the pharmacy to get new doses after your first collection. Also, ask if you can skip doctor appointments and urine testing for at least the next three months.

4. **BE PREPARED to go through involuntary withdrawal.** If you have an opiate habit and are currently using the illegal drug trade to obtain your drugs, your dealer(s) may get sick. Have backup plans that include increasing the number of dealers you can score off of, getting medical help (i.e. drug substitution programs) and make sure you have all the necessary medications, food and drinks (especially protein-based and electrolyte boosting liquids) you will need to detox off opiates. Similar steps can be taken by those with habits to other drug types.
5. **STOCK UP** on drug using equipment/materials, get enough to last you at least 3 - 4 weeks (longer if you are high risk for infection and if programs can manage it)
6. **WIPE DOWN** drug packages/wraps with alcohol-based cleansers after your dealer drops them off or once you've picked them up (a minimum 60% alcohol concentration has been shown to effectively kill the virus). If your dealers are in the habit of carrying dope in their mouths ask them if they can change this habit during this outbreak - if they won't, be careful handling the packages and do the cleaning as advised above. Remember that anti-bacterial washes don't kill viruses but can be better than nothing, especially if they contain alcohol.
7. **AVOID PUTTING DRUG BAGS/WRAPPS IN YOUR MOUTH, VAGINA OR ANUS.** If you must carry it in your body, clean vigorously with an alcohol-based cleanser both before and after you take it out, and if carried in your mouth use an alcohol-based mouthwash afterwards.
8. **WASH YOUR HANDS** with soap and hot water vigorously for at least 20 seconds (but longer if you can) every time you come into contact with others, after handling money and after you get your drugs packages. Paper towels are preferred for drying hands, or at least use a clean towel
9. **PREPARE YOUR DRUGS YOURSELF** and ensure that you don't handle or touch other people's equipment/drugs and don't let them touch yours.
10. If you have symptoms or think you're getting sick, **AVOID GOING TO YOUR LOCAL HR PROGRAMS - HAVE THEM DELIVER TO YOU** and tell them you are unwell so they can take the necessary precautions for their safety.
11. Be prepared for the **POSSIBILITY OF NEEDLE EXCHANGES AND DRUG TREATMENT PROGRAMS CLOSING DOWN** (and possibly drug detoxes) and follow steps 2, 3, 4 and 5 to reduce any problems related to running out of supplies or equipment.
12. Remember that people with compromised immune systems, lung diseases and other pre-existing conditions are more at risk of contracting COVID19 and help keep them safe by keeping yourself safe - follow these and other harm reduction tips to help you achieve this goal.