



Harm Reduction: Reducing the Risks of Substance Use

Any step to reduce use or to lower the risks when using substances is a step toward wellness. It might not be what you fully want for your child, but it's moving in a healthier direction.

Every day, we engage in some form of harm reduction. We wash our hands to minimize the risk of contagious disease, use seat belts when driving, or wear helmets when playing sports. Similarly, there are steps one can take to reduce risks associated with substance use. Reducing risks can result in:

- Fewer overdoses and associated deaths
- A decrease in the transmission of diseases like Hep C and HIV
- A way to connect individuals to overdose education, counseling, and referrals to treatment
- Less stigma associated with substance use and co-occurring disorders
- A way to promote hope and healing

Strategies to Reduce Risks

Most of us are familiar with the advice to use a designated driver or public transportation when planning to drink alcohol. Drinking water between cocktails, counting drinks, and not drinking on an empty stomach are other measures to reduce the risks associated with alcohol.

Similarly, there are harm reduction strategies while using other substances. For instance, when it comes to opioids like heroin, fentanyl and prescription pain pills, harm reduction strategies include:

- Fentanyl test strips
- Clean and sterile needles
- Using substances with other people instead of alone
- Using apps like the **Brave App** or **Canary**

- Not mixing substances
- Naloxone (e.g., Narcan) to reverse an overdose
- Using less after periods of abstinence or when sick
- Using medications to reduce cravings

Instead of stopping altogether, some people respond better when asked if they are willing to use substances in a safer manner or cut back. Your child may be willing to stop using one substance but not others. For example, they may stop using opioids but keep using marijuana.

Your child might be willing to consider an abstinence challenge. Over the course of 30 days or so they would examine what the benefits and drawbacks are of using the substance(s). If this “sobriety sampling” is appealing, their goal may change from moderation to abstinence.

If your child wants to consider formal treatment, it may help to find a program that “meets people where they are.” Treatment plans should be based on your child’s goals and what they want to change about their substance use. While some recovery approaches may not support goals outside of total abstinence, there are multiple paths toward getting help and there is no shame in any approach that a person with desire for positive change chooses.

Moving Your Child Toward Wellness

While not encouraging substance use, you can support your child by promoting healthier behaviors and reducing risks. This includes noticing and encouraging any positive changes, helping your child engage in healthy alternatives to substance use, setting boundaries, using consequences appropriately, and modeling self-care.

Articles addressing topics pertaining to harm reduction can be found on Partnership to End Addiction’s resource hub: <https://drugfree.org/harm-reduction-resource-center/>

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, harm reduction strategies are a way to reduce the health and social risks associated with substance use. They may be a good first step for your child to take in the direction of wellness.