

Harm reduction strategies

Drugs have always been part of human experience

Alcohol and other drugs have been part of human culture for thousands of years across celebrations, rituals, social connection, and personal exploration. They are not going away, and it is important that we talk about them honestly and without judgement.

People use substances for many different reasons, and those reasons are valid. Some people use drugs or alcohol to relax and unwind after a stressful day. Others use them to connect socially, to feel more confident, to enhance intimacy, or simply to have fun. For some, substances can provide temporary relief from pain, trauma, or difficult emotions. And for others, they are a meaningful part of their cultural or social identity.

Recognising these positive motivations is not about encouraging drug use, it is about being honest. When we only focus on the risks and ignore why people use substances, we miss the opportunity to have real, helpful conversations.

The reality is that for people living with HIV, as for everyone, the goal is not necessarily abstinence, it is safety, wellbeing, and informed choice. Knowing how to reduce harm while using substances can make a significant difference to your health, your treatment, and your quality of life.

Here are some harm reduction strategies that can help you stay safer.

Harm reduction strategies

Harm reduction is an approach which aims to reduce the risks and encourages safer behaviours. Harm reduction unfortunately may not always keep people safe. It recognises that people have different experiences with substance use and supports them to make choices that work for their lives.

In simple terms, harm reduction includes strategies and actions aimed at reducing the potential health, social, and economic impacts of alcohol and other drug use for the person, their families, and the wider community without judgement.

This approach is about support, respect, and practical ways to stay safer, no matter where someone is at in their journey.



Harm reduction strategies

Before use	During Use	After use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know what you are taking and plan your dose • Eat and hydrate before using • Time your ART and set alarms if needed • Use in safe environments with people you trust • Have naloxone or drug checking test kits available if needed • Check in with your mood and mental state before using • Decide on boundaries and consent before the night begins • Have sterile equipment ready if injecting or smoking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start low and go slow, especially with unknown potency • Stay hydrated, small sips rather than large amounts • Try to use one substance at a time, or space them out • Use condoms and lube if engaging in sex and make sure they are easy to access • Listen to your body, take breaks and re-centre • Check in with the people around you regularly • If using with friends, talk through plans including how everyone is getting home safely 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let your body rest, sleep and nourish itself. • Reflect gently and without harsh self-judgement. • Decompress with someone you trust if you need to • Return to your ART routine as soon as possible • Track your mood or any triggers that came up • Reach out for peer support or wellbeing services

If you would like to reach out for support after using, these services are here for you:

- **Queensland Positive People (QPP)** — peer support and navigation for people living with HIV in Queensland www.qpp.org.au
- **QuiHN** — free and non-judgmental harm reduction, health, and AOD support services across Queensland www.quihn.org.au
- **QuiVAA** — a peer-based organisation supporting people who use illicit drugs in Queensland www.quivaa.org.au

