

COVID-19



Reynolds Health Strategies

COVID-19 Stimulant Use, and Harm Reduction

The following is a non-exhaustive tip sheet for stimulant-preferring or polydrug users, focusing on amphetamines, cocaine and crack cocaine. While COVID-19 is primarily considered a respiratory infection, our heart and breathing systems are highly interdependent. Stimulant use—including cocaine and amphetamines—can have a number of negative effects on heart health. Cocaine and amphetamine use can each lead to very dangerous, sometimes fatal consequences, including very high blood pressure, heart attacks, irregular heart rhythms, stroke, and other kinds of damage to the heart.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has identified people who have serious underlying heart conditions, including cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and diabetes, to be at higher risk for severe complications from COVID-19 infection.¹ People who smoke drugs also experience higher rates of respiratory conditions like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and asthma, and both of these are related to increased risk of more severe COVID-19 complications. Maintaining your overall heart and lung health are important considerations to reduce your risk for the more negative consequences of COVID-19. Those working with people experiencing homelessness or engaged in street-based sex work should also consider and share this guidance. People in these communities may use stimulants non-recreationally to stay awake if unhoused, for protection against violence or theft, to stay warm, or to keep working.

HARM REDUCTION CONSIDERATIONS

Drug Shortages and Bad Cuts

As with the broader drug supply, there may be disruptions to the availability of stimulant supplies during the pandemic, whether because states and local jurisdictions adopt “shelter-in-place” orders, sellers become infected and ill themselves, or other reasons. It is also possible that decreased supply results in bad or new cuts. As with other drugs:

- Stock up. Purchase extra on your drug of choice, if possible. Consider what other sources might be available if yours becomes ill or otherwise unavailable. What alternative substances (illicit, licit, over-the-counter, etc.) can you consider in case of withdrawal or sudden loss of access? Who might you trust to help you collaboratively ration your supply, so it lasts as long as you'd like?
- Start low, go slow. You can always do more of the drugs you have! Especially if you're trying to ration, start with a lower amount and see how you feel. If you're injecting, consider trying a tester shot, or injecting a small amount and waiting 20 seconds before fully pressing the plunger. This can also be protective against opioid overdose, if your stimulant supply has been contaminated by fentanyl.

More info at
[PreventEpidemics.org](https://www.preventepidemics.org)
[ResolveToSaveLives.org](https://www.resolvetosavelives.org)
[VitalStrategies.org](https://www.vitalstrategies.org)

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/groups-at-higher-risk.html>

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Overdose and Overramping

Fentanyl has been detected in stimulant supplies around the country, leaving often unsuspecting and unprepared users at higher risk of opioid overdose. Taking more than your system can handle can also lead to stimulant “overdose,” also known as overramping. Consider the following precautions and strategies:

- **Checking drugs for fentanyl.** Try to have fentanyl test strips available to test your supply before using. Test any street drugs you’re using, including any benzos or other drugs you may have for your comedown. Your local harm reduction organization, if you have one near you, may be able to provide test strips or help you find them. Even if you don’t have test strips, try crushing up and shaking drugs well to help avoid uneven concentrations of fentanyl in crack or meth. Only test drug residue, not shards or even pieces of shards.
 - **A note about methamphetamine (meth).** Harm reduction experts have found that meth residue must be diluted in slightly more water than other drugs before testing for fentanyl, often producing a false positive if not. Please refer to the pictured guidance from The DOPE Project in San Francisco. **SEE MORE HERE: [HTTPS://HARMREDUCTION.ORG/ISSUES/FENTANYL/](https://harmreduction.org/issues/fentanyl/)**
- **Checking drugs for stimulants.** You may also want to test your drugs to see if what you bought is actually cocaine or meth. The manufacturer of fentanyl test strips also makes cocaine test strips. For meth, you can use household bleach to confirm.
 - **Testing meth with bleach.** Do not use the “splashless” kind of bleach. Pour a small amount of bleach in a container (about 2 teaspoons) then drop a small amount of meth into the bleach. Ideally, use a clear glass container like a shot glass so you can see clearly the reaction and color of the solution (meth should have a slightly yellowish tint). It will spin ferociously in very fast circles and move around on top of the bleach. Think about fireworks that spin on the ground; when it is dropped in bleach meth acts very much like that. When it is done spinning, it will turn into a cloudy fog, leaving an oily substance floating on top. If the solution sinks and just sits there or if it only clouds up, it’s not meth.
 - Thank you to Patrick Rezac of [One Voice Recovery](#) in Salt Lake City for the tip!
- **Keep naloxone handy.** Learn how to administer naloxone, a medication that which can rapidly reverse an opioid overdose. Encourage those you use with, or who might otherwise be with you when you do, to carry naloxone and know how to administer it. Check out Next Distro (below in the resources section) for information on how to get naloxone if there is none in your area.
- **Overramping.** The effects of overramping can be reduced by drinking water to stay hydrated, eating food, getting sleep, breathing, exercising, walking, taking a warm shower and getting fresh air (Drug Policy Alliance). See the resource list below for more tips.
 - **CALL 911 IMMEDIATELY IF:**
 - Body temperature reaches 104° F, someone becomes unconscious, or they are showing signs of confusion
 - You suspect a stroke: someone suddenly loses the ability to speak or to move an arm or leg on one side, or experiences facial paralysis on one side
 - Someone loses consciousness and you notice that they are not breathing

Hygiene and Cleanliness

If your living situation allows, maintaining the recommendations for hand-washing and maintaining social distancing can help you prevent COVID-19 infection.

- **Hand-washing.** Wash your hands for 20 seconds after coming in contact with people, whether it’s when purchasing drugs, exchanging money, or sharing drugs. If you can wash your hands before and after using drugs (or at least before), all the better. You can use soap and water or hand sanitizer (with at least 60% alcohol in it) to kill COVID-19.
- **Social distancing while using.** It’s recommended that people stay 6 feet apart when out in public. This is difficult when sharing drugs, and depending upon the space where you’re using, distancing may be impossible. But if you are in a place where you can keep your distance, try to stay at least 6 feet apart.

Safer use of stimulants

Anticipate an Increased Libido

While COVID-19 is not transmitted sexually, if stimulants give you an increased sex drive, try to practice safer sex. Have enough condoms and/or lubricant accessible. Avoid kissing whenever possible. Try positions that will keep your faces further apart, like doggie style. Since COVID-19 can be present in fecal matter, consider using barriers such as dental dams for anal/oral sex and washing hands well after contact with the anus. See the resource list below for more, and remember—enthusiastic consent is the sexiest safety!

Eat, Drink and SLEEP

A number of potential harms from stimulant use are secondary, due to feeling a decreased need for food and sleep. Avoiding sleep, food and water can also have negative impacts on immune system functioning, increasing vulnerability to illnesses like COVID-19. In extreme cases, days-long sleep deprivation can result in hallucinations or psychosis, so try to build sleep into your plan when using. If possible, try to set limits on use (either money or time or both) and try to take breaks if you can.

- **Shelf-stable healthy eating** (from the American Heart Association, with a few additions): You can maintain a healthy diet even if you can't access fresh food. Here are some shelf-stable options:
 - Canned, frozen and dried fruits and vegetables (low or no added salt and sugar options)
 - Canned meats like light tuna or white meat chicken (salt free), packed in water
 - Frozen chicken breast is safe for up to one year in a freezer set to zero degrees or below (store as air-tightly as possible to preserve maximum freshness)
 - Dried beans and legumes (or canned with no salt added)
 - Dried whole grains like brown rice and quinoa
 - Eggs in their shells are safe three to five weeks and unopened egg substitute is safe up to one year in the refrigerator
 - Cereals, granola, granola bars
 - Peanut butter
- **Over-the-counter (OTC) sleep aids**
 - Nighttime cold medication
 - Antihistamines
 - Melatonin tea or supplements
- **Immunity-supporting supplements**
 - Vitamin C
 - Vitamin D
 - Zinc
- **Hydration**
 - Water, Gatorade, Pedialyte
 - Try to moderate alcohol consumption, which has a dehydrating effect.
 - Be mindful especially if drinking alcohol and using cocaine/crack; the two interact in the liver to produce a third chemical—cocaethylene—which can intensify the impact of each substance on the body.

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Self-Harm and Wound Care

Stimulants can create a need or strong desire to scratch or pick at the skin, creating entryways for pathogens. Take care as best you can to avoid extended sleep deprivation which could make this worse. Try to keep first aid and wound care supplies just in case, as well as skin care agents such as Eucerin or Vaseline, or whatever skin care lotion you prefer.

Alternatives to Slamming

To avoid the complications that can come with the higher frequency of injecting stimulants, consider alternative routes of administration. Using other routes even occasionally can be protective! No matter which route you choose, try not to share any equipment. See the resource list below for more detail.

Swallowing

- **Dilute drugs in water and drink**
 - Pack into empty glycerin capsules (available online, or often at health food stores). Swallow with liquid
 - Parachuting: Crush well and place drugs in the center of a small piece of tissue paper. Bring the corners together and twist to contain your drugs (held by the twisted piece, it'll look like a mini-parachute). Swallow with liquid

Smoking

- **Crack/meth smoking kit supplies**
 - As COVID-19 is transmitted by saliva, sharing pipes or stems can transmit the virus. Wash the pipes and stems after use with soap and water, wipe it down with alcohol wipes (60% alcohol or greater) or even bleach.
 - Glass pipes from head/tobacco/smoke shops or Pyrex stems handle heat well and are stronger than conventional glass.
 - Heat-insulated mouthpiece: rubber tubes, spark plugs, thick rubber bands
 - Alcohol pads to sterilize pipes and mouthpieces
 - Wooden push sticks, like chopsticks
 - Chapstick or other lip balm, to keep lips moisturized and avoid cracking
 - Chewing gum, lollipops, hard candy, for dry mouth (which may also contribute to tooth decay)
 - Condoms, which can be tied off and used to hold blowback smoke
- **A note on foils:** Thick, coated foils are specially made and can be good for smoking meth or crack, but are often hard to find in the U.S. If choosing to smoke using household aluminum foil, burn it before using to avoid inhaling its chemicals, and break up the rock or crystals a bit first.
- **Make your own pipe:** Check out this Exchange Supplies video on how to make a pipe out of foil:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRhrtCcbowE>

Snorting

- Crush drugs into as fine a powder as possible
- Use sterile straws (or clean paper). Avoid using dollar bills!
- Try not to share straws. Use different colors to more easily identify and personalize each person's straw
- Flush your nostrils with warm water or saline after snorting. Syringe service programs often offer small ampoules of sterile water or saline solution. This can support the health of the nasal cavity and help dissolve drugs, meaning less is wasted.
- Using a little vitamin E oil after the nasal rinse is a great thing for the nose and helps it stay healthy. Apply with the tip of your finger or a cotton swab.

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Booty Bumping/Boofing/Plugging

- If possible, clean yourself out with an enema before booty bumping.
- Prepare your drugs using standard harm reduction tips for injecting, and draw up into a 3 cc barrel syringe. REMOVE THE NEEDLE, apply a small amount of lubricant around the anus, insert the tip of the syringe into the anus, and slowly depress the plunger.
- Try your best to relax, and be sure to insert the syringe all the way in, past your sphincter. It can help to lay on your side. If you aren't relaxed you will encounter resistance and possible pain.
- You can also use a lighter to gently heat the plastic of the syringe, then use your fingers to smooth any rough edges on the end of the syringe. Do not put the plastic directly in the flame. Just hold the syringe above the heat for about five seconds to make it more pliable

Hot Railing (meth only)

Note: Hot railing carries a high risk for overdose if your meth contains fentanyl. If there is any doubt, try to use one of the alternatives listed above.

- **Supplies:** Pyrex glass stem about 6 inches long; rubber tubing similar to those for crack kits (4-6 inches long); camping size 1-pound propane fuel tank; and manual start hand torch screw-on attachment.
 - Prepare a line or a bump—the finer the powder, the better the vapor will be. Adjust the torch flame to about an inch long, slow and steady, low gas flow. While holding the rubber end of the glass tubing, heat the end (1 inch) of the glass tube until the end turns red hot.
 - After the end is red hot, put the rubber end in your nose like you would a tooter when snorting. Put the hot end of the glass pipe right above the powder line/bump you prepared. Avoid touching the glass to powder; it will smother the end of the glass tube and your dope will be wasted.
 - **Note: DO NOT** snort an uncrushed shard. It could get lodged in the nasal passage and cause severe burning and damage, increasing risk of infection.
 - Inhale through your nose like you would if you were snorting, and the heat will vaporize the meth all at once, delivering a potent dose.
 - **Note:** The vapor is smooth and does not burn like with snorting. If it burns (like meth usually burns when snorting, which is different than how hot vapor feels), the tube wasn't hot enough.

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RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

Crack and cocaine

- Chrysalis. (2009) Harm reduction for crack cocaine users. Chrysalis CDP, Dublin.
- Booklet PDF (Direct link)
- Drug Policy Alliance - How can we reduce the harms associated with using cocaine?

Methamphetamine

- The DOPE Project in San Francisco, Fentanyl and Fentanyl Test Strip information: <https://harmreduction.org/issues/fentanyl/>
- Tweaker.org
- Chemsex First Aid: One of the best resources we have, to keep ourselves and our friends safe in chemsex environments, is each other.
- Tweaking Tips
- Apps to Support You
- topOverdose.org: Overamping, or speed "overdose"

Heart Health

- American Heart Association: What heart patients should know about coronavirus
- U.S. CDC: People who are at higher risk for severe illness

Sex and Stimulants

- AIDS United: ChemSex 101
- Mainline: Chemsex info and support during corona pandemic
- Mainline: Chemsex chat (Monday-Friday, 11 a.m. to -5 p.m. Central European Time)
- New York City Health Department: Sex and Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)
- The Cranky Queer: How to Have Sex in the COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic

Safer Supplies

- Next Distro: A great source for harm reduction supplies, including naloxone, that can be mailed directly to you.
- Exchange Supplies video on how to make a pipe out of foil: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRhrtCcbowE>

Other

- BTNX Inc.: Harm Reduction (fentanyl test strip manufacturer)
- U.S. FDA advises patients on use of NSAIDs for COVID-19
- Grund J-P, Coffin P, Jauffret-Roustide M, Dijkstra M, Bruin D, Blanken P. The fast and furious – cocaine, amphetamines and harm reduction. In 2010. p. 205–54.

About Us

Vital Strategies is a global public health organization working in 70+ countries to strengthen public health systems. Resolve to Save Lives, an initiative of Vital Strategies, aims to prevent at least one hundred million deaths from cardiovascular disease and epidemics. Through its Prevent Epidemics program, Resolve to Save Lives, an initiative of Vital Strategies, has rapidly leveraged existing networks to establish a multi-disciplinary, multi-pronged effort to support countries throughout Africa and beyond. This work is supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Gates Philanthropy Partners, which is funded with support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative.

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