



Safer Injection Practices for People who Inject Drugs

PREVENTION IS POWER

**Veterans Crisis Line
1-800-273-8255**

VA



**U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs**

PREVENTION IS POWER

Injecting drugs brings risk, such as HIV, hepatitis, endocarditis (infection of heart lining), skin infections, and overdose. There are steps you can take to lower your risk. While it may not be possible to do all of them, even using just one step can reduce harm!



Prepare Yourself

- Find a safe, clean, well-lit area.
- Clean your hands with soap and water or an alcohol pad.
- Wipe the injection area with an alcohol pad in one direction.
- Never lick your skin or equipment.




Prepare Solution

- Using your own clean cooker or spoon, mix drugs with sterile water.
- Never use puddle water, saliva, whiskey or water from the toilet bowl. If you use toilet water, take water from the tank.
- If needed, heat the solution. If an acid is needed to dissolve drugs, use the smallest amount possible to reduce risk of vein damage. Avoid use of lemon juice and soda. Ascorbic acid (vitamin C powder) is a safer option.
- Divide any drug you are sharing when it's dry or before cooking.
- Fentanyl is sometimes mixed in other drugs. Use a fentanyl test strip to check. If present, try using less than usual, go even slower, or consider not using at all to prevent overdose.
- Add a filter (piece of cotton ball or pellet – NOT cigarette filters). Reusing cotton can introduce bacteria or fungi into your blood system, i.e., "cotton fever."
- Insert the tip of the syringe into filter and pull up solution. Remove any air bubbles from the syringe.



Choosing A Safer Injection Site

Avoid dangerous red areas like the neck, inner wrist, and groin.

-  **Green Areas are Safer**
-  **Try to Avoid Yellow Areas**
-  **Red Areas are Dangerous**



Find A Vein

- Plump up veins by making sure you are warm, hydrated or by lowering your arm. If you use a tourniquet, place it a few inches above the injection site to help the vein plump up (avoid using shoestrings or leather belts).
- Insert the needle bevel (or “hole”) up into the vein.
- Never inject in your neck, inner wrist or groin. Arms are the safest place to inject.
- Rotate sites and allow veins time to heal.

Treatment for Substance Use

Buprenorphine (subutex, suboxone) and methadone are medications which can help reduce opioid cravings, withdrawals, and opioid use. It's risky to try and quit drugs all at once or “cold turkey.” Talk with your VA provider about these medications and treatment programs.

Register And Do A Test Shot

- Before injecting, pull back slightly on the syringe to check for dark red blood. This means you correctly hit a vein.
- If the blood is bright red, frothy and pushes back the plunger, you hit an artery. Take the syringe out immediately and seek medical attention!
- If using a tourniquet, release before injecting.
- Inject a little of the drug solution to test strength and effect before injecting more from that syringe, especially if you haven't used in a while!



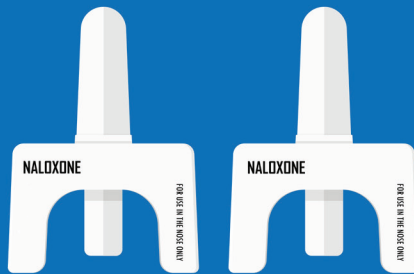
Needle Reuse

If you must reuse needles, clean them after every use.

- Draw cold, clean water from a clean container into the syringe, shake for 30 seconds, then discard the water. Repeat until the water in the syringe is clear (no blood).
- Draw household bleach into the syringe from a new clean container, shake for 2 minutes, then discard the bleach.
- Rinse out the syringe using clean, cold water from a new clean container, shake for 30 seconds, then discard the water.



Repeat the pictured steps at least three times, with water, bleach, and water again.



Preventing Overdose

- If using opioids, try not to take with other downers, like alcohol or benzos. Mixing opioids with coke or meth also increases your overdose risk.
- Always use with a friend or around other people. If you are alone, use an app like *Never Use Alone* (neverusealone.com) or call the *Never Use Alone* hotline (800) 484-3731 where an operator will stay on the line while you use. If you drop out, they'll call 911, reporting an "unresponsive person" at your location.
- Fentanyl, a powerful opioid, is often mixed with street drugs and increases risk for overdose. Keep naloxone on hand to reverse an opioid overdose.
- Scan the QR code above to learn more or visit <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/substance-use/overdose.asp>.

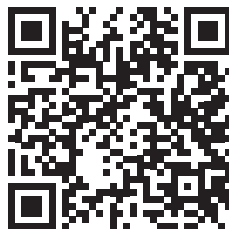


Testing and Prevention

- Get tested for HIV and hepatitis C every 6-12 months
- Get vaccines to prevent hepatitis A & B and tetanus
- Get tested for sexually transmitted infections

Clean Up

- Once you finish injecting, dispose of used syringe(s) in a sharps container or a heavy plastic container like a laundry detergent or bleach bottle.
- Take your used equipment to a disposal site, if available. If you cannot, throw it in the garbage after packing it in a puncture-proof container. Sharps disposal guidelines and programs vary depending on where you live. Locate a safe disposal site by visiting <https://safeneedledisposal.org/state-search> or scanning the QR code.



Skin and Wound Care

Abscesses (painful pocket of pus that forms around an infection) can be caused by improperly cleaned skin, a missed shot, non-sterile injection equipment, or contaminated drugs.

Seek medical attention for diagnosis and treatment for a wound that is causing pain or distress.

- Watch for infection signs, such as bad odor or smell, affected area getting bigger, redness around edges, swelling, tenderness, thick pus, fever, chills, pain, loss of feeling, or extreme fatigue.
- Be aware that symptoms may not always appear at the injection site.
- If you miss a shot, apply ice or frozen items (frozen bagged food, snow, cold drink) on the same day and elevate. If swelling occurs the next day, apply heat regularly using a clean cloth soaked in hot water, or use a hand warmer.
- Avoid injecting at or below the affected area.
- Do not squeeze or poke an abscess which can introduce more bacteria to the wound.
- If you have concerns or are experiencing chills, fever, extreme fatigue or pain in the abscess, seek medical attention for a possible blood infection which could be deadly.

Support and Resources

Your health is important to us. Your health care team can help connect you with information and resources you might need to keep yourself as safe and healthy as possible.

- Your VA may provide access to clean syringes, but it is dependent on VA location.
- All VAs provide access to testing, naloxone, buprenorphine and HIV PrEP.
- Check for syringe programs in your area: <https://nasen.org/map/>

VA Substance Use Disorder Program Locator

www2.va.gov/directory/guide/SUD.asp

Substance Use Disorder Treatment Locator for non-Veterans

findtreatment.samhsa.gov/

HIV prevention and testing, VA SSP info



www.hiv.va.gov

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Text 838255

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