

What is Harm Reduction?

A position statement from the International Harm Reduction Association

Harm reduction refers to policies, programmes and practices that aim to reduce the harms associated with the use of psychoactive drugs in people unable or unwilling to stop. The defining features are the focus on the prevention of harm, rather than on the prevention of drug use itself, and the focus on people who continue to use drugs.

Harm reduction began to be discussed frequently after the threat of HIV spreading among and from injecting drug users was first recognised. However, similar approaches have long been used in many other contexts for a wide range of drugs.

Harm reduction complements approaches that seek to prevent or reduce the overall level of drug consumption. It is based on the recognition that many people throughout the world continue to use psychoactive drugs despite even the strongest efforts to prevent the initiation or continued use of drugs. Harm reduction accepts that many people who use drugs are unable or unwilling to stop using drugs at any given time. Access to good treatment is important for people with drug problems, but many people with drug problems are unable or unwilling to get treatment. Furthermore, the majority of people who use drugs do not need treatment. There is a need to provide people who use drugs with options that help to minimise risks from continuing to use drugs, and of harming themselves or others. It is therefore essential that harm reduction information, services and other interventions exist to help keep people healthy and safe. Allowing people to suffer or die from preventable causes is not an option. Many people who use drugs prefer to use informal and non-clinical methods to reduce their drug consumption or reduce the risks associated with their drug use.

This short statement sets out the main characteristics of harm reduction. This statement is designed to be relevant to all psychoactive drugs including controlled drugs, alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceutical drugs. The specific harm reduction interventions may differ for different drugs. Readers can refer to the IHRA website (www.ihra.net) for more detailed guidance on harm reduction interventions.

Definition

“Harm Reduction” refers to policies, programmes and practices that aim primarily to reduce the adverse health, social and economic consequences of the use of legal and illegal psychoactive drugs without necessarily reducing drug consumption. Harm reduction benefits people who use drugs, their families and the community.

Principles

The harm reduction approach to drugs is based on a strong commitment to public health and human rights.

Targeted at risks and harms

Harm reduction is a targeted approach that focuses on specific risks and harms. Politicians, policymakers, communities, researchers, frontline workers and people who use drugs should ascertain:

- What are the specific risks and harms associated with the use of specific psychoactive drugs?
- What causes those risks and harms?
- What can be done to reduce these risks and harms?