

# 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 want for your child, but it's moving in a healthier direction.

## Why harm reduction matters

Every day, we engage in some form of harm reduction. We wash hands to minimize the risk of COVID-19, 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
- Lower overall healthcare costs
- 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 like Oxycontin and Percocet 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](#)
- [Safe smoking kits](#)
- Test shots or going slow
- Not mixing substances
- [PrEP](#) to reduce the transmission of HIV
- [Naloxone \(e.g., Narcan\)](#) to reverse an overdose
- Using less after periods of abstinence or when sick
- Using [medications to reduce cravings](#)
- Using [nasal sprays](#) to consume substances

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

Some people are willing to consider an abstinence challenge. A loved one examines what the benefits and drawbacks are of using the substance(s) over the course of 30 days or so. If this "sobriety sampling" is appealing, their goal may change from moderation to abstinence.

If your loved one 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 loved one’s goals and what they want to change about their substance use. You or your loved one will have to do research to find a program that is the right fit.

## WATCH NOW

### Partnership Live: Harm Reduction

Partnership’s **Elizabeth Liguori**, M.B.A., Director, Family Services Operations and Grants, and **Mithra Salmassi**, Educational Content Editor, discuss Harm Reduction.

### Moving your child toward wellness

While not encouraging substance use, family members can help loved ones by promoting healthier behaviors and reducing risks. [Community Reinforcement and Family Training \(CRAFT\)](#) is a way to improve communication around substance use and other difficult topics. This includes noticing and encouraging any positive changes, helping your child engage in healthy alternatives to substance use, setting boundaries, using consequences appropriately and self-care.

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 loved one to take in the direction of wellness.