

HIV and Injecting Drugs

HIV Questions and Answers



Do you inject drugs?

There are things you can do to reduce the risk of getting HIV and other diseases and lower your chance of injuries and overdoses.

If I think my drug use is a problem for me, how can I get help?

- There are many programs that can help you to stop using. If you aren't ready to stop using, there are also many programs that can help you to reduce the harms your use might cause.
- To find out what treatment options are out there, talk with someone at your local needle exchange or call the Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information Help Line at 800-327-5050. Your case manager or health care provider could also help.

What are the risks that come from injecting drugs?

- You can get HIV, hepatitis, and other infections if you share needles, cottons, injection water, or other equipment.
- Some infections can make you very sick. You can get blood poisoning, tetanus, and an infection of the heart from bacteria in needles. You can get cotton fever from bacteria found in cotton.
- You can also get infections from using lemon juice or vinegar to dissolve your shot.
- If you use dirty equipment or if you don't wash your skin, you can get abscesses. Missing your vein when you inject can also cause them.
- Overdosing is easy with drugs like heroin because they slow down your heart rate and breathing. Mixing heroin with other drugs is even more likely to lead to an overdose.

How can I lower my HIV risk if I inject?

- Use a sharp and sterile needle. Visit a needle exchange site for sterile supplies. You can also get new needles from many pharmacies in Massachusetts.
- If you must share equipment, share with as few people as possible and clean everything between uses. **Note:** cleaning with bleach lowers HIV risk but does not lower hepatitis C risk much.
- To clean needles and syringes before each use, first rinse them with water three times. Then fill them with bleach and shake for two minutes. Get rid of the bleach then repeat the whole process two times with new bleach. Finally, rinse with water three times.
- Use the cleanest water you can find for mixing and injecting drugs and rinsing equipment.
- Mark your equipment so you know for sure that it is yours and you do not pick up someone else's by mistake.

What can I do to lower other risks from injecting?

- Before you inject, clean your injection site with an alcohol wipe or soap and water.
- Rotate your injection sites. This gives them time to heal and cuts down on scarring. When you hit near a spot that is healing, try to hit closer to your heart from where you last hit.
- Use Vitamin C powder and lots of water to dissolve your shot. Try not to use lemon juice or vinegar. They can cause serious infections.
- Always clean up after yourself! Remember that your blood could harm someone else.
- Go to the nearest hospital emergency room if you have a fever, chest pains, or a red, painful area that's not going away. You may need medicine to help.



What if I share drugs with someone else?

Sharing drugs with someone else can pass HIV and other infections. Be safer by following these steps:

- Use separate syringes, cookers, cottons, and water for dividing your shots.
- If everyone must reuse their own supplies and water, do a dry divide: split the drugs on a clean surface before adding the water.
- If you can't do a dry divide, and only one person has a sterile syringe, use the sterile syringe to draw up the water and divide the shot.
- Be aware that it is going to take time and patience to change your habits and do things differently, especially if you are part of a group.

How can I get new needles and get rid of used ones?

- You can buy sterile syringes at most pharmacies in Massachusetts without a prescription.
- You can get free sterile syringes and get rid of used ones at needle exchange sites. They are listed at www.mass.gov/dph/aids/resources.
- You can also get rid of used needles and syringes at disposal kiosks throughout the state. They are listed at www.mass.gov/dph/aids/needles-syringes.

Call 911 if someone begins to overdose.

Where can I get more information?

Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information Help Line

English / Español: 800-327-5050

TTY: 617-536-5872



Massachusetts Department of Public Health

HIV/AIDS Bureau

www.mass.gov/dph/aids



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What can I do to lower the chance of overdosing?

- Find out as much as you can about the drugs you are injecting. Do you trust the dealer? Do the drugs taste and smell the same as usual? If you know about what you are using, it can keep you safer.
- If you are unsure about the drugs, snort a little bit before you shoot up or take a small test shot first.
- Avoid mixing drugs that have the same effects. For example, don't mix heroin with alcohol or benzos like Xanax®, Klonopin®, or Valium®.
- Know how much of a drug you can handle. If you have not used lately, your body might not be able to handle as much drug as before. Try to do less at first. The amount you can handle goes down after only one or two days of not using. Even if you are dopesick, your body might not be able to handle the same amount it could before.
- If you have any health problems or if you have been sick, your body may not be able to handle as much drug as usual. Be careful after any time you have been sick. If you have hepatitis C and your liver isn't working well, it won't be able to process the drug well. This could lead to an overdose.
- Avoid injecting drugs alone. If you are alone, make sure you have someone you can reach right away if you are afraid you might be overdosing.
- Carry naloxone (Narcan®), which is a drug used to help people who overdose on opiates like heroin.

- Call the Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information Help Line (800-327-5050) for more information.

- Call 911 if you or someone you are with begins to overdose.

What are HIV and AIDS?

- HIV is the virus that causes AIDS.
- AIDS is a late-stage disease involving severe damage to the immune system.

How is HIV spread?

- Sharing needles or works when injecting drugs.
- Contact with blood from another person.
- Having vaginal or anal sex without a condom.
- Women with HIV can pass the virus to their children before or during birth or when they breastfeed.

Can HIV be spread in other ways?

- You cannot get HIV from casual contact like a hug or a handshake or by sharing a glass with someone who has the virus.
- You cannot get HIV from someone coughing or sneezing.
- HIV can sometimes be spread through oral sex, but it is low risk.

What should I know about HIV testing?

- A test is the only way to know for sure if you have HIV.
- No one can force you to take a test, and you must give consent before one is done.
- You can get tested at your doctor's office, at a needle exchange site, or at one of the other testing programs across Massachusetts. These are listed at www.mass.gov/dph/aids/resources.
- There are different kinds of tests. The person providing the test can tell you more about which test(s) they use and when the results will be ready.
- You may be asked about the last time you shared a needle or had sex without a condom. This is because some tests can find HIV infection very soon after someone has been infected but other tests cannot.
- You may also be offered tests for hepatitis, syphilis, Chlamydia, and gonorrhea. This is because these infections are passed in the same ways as HIV.

If I have sex, what can I do to lower my HIV risk?

- Use condoms *every time* you have sex.
- Have oral sex instead of anal or vaginal sex.
- Reduce your number of sex partners.
- Know your partner's HIV status and level of risk.

Is there a link between HIV and other diseases?

- Shooting up can put you at risk for different viral, bacterial, and fungal infections. See the "What are the risks that come from injecting drugs?" section of this brochure for more information.
- Unprotected sex can also put you at risk for sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhea, syphilis, Chlamydia, herpes, and genital warts.

What should I do if I have shared a needle or had condomless sex with someone who has HIV or likely has HIV?

- You can reduce your risk by taking certain medicines for one month after having sex without a condom or sharing a needle.
- These medicines have to be started less than 72 hours after your risk. The sooner you start taking these medicines, the better.
- Your nearest hospital emergency room or health care provider can help you decide if these medicines are right for you. If they are, the doctor can give them to you or tell you where to get them.
- If these medicines are not right for you, talk to the doctor about when to get an HIV test.