

2.3 HARM REDUCTION – WHAT IS IT AND WHY IS IT USEFUL?

By the end of this section, you will:

- 1. Understand what harm reduction is*
- 2. Understand practical ways to reduce the harms associated with cannabis use, through both abstinence and the reduction of risky behaviours for youth who are already using cannabis*

WHAT IS HARM REDUCTION?

“Taking a pragmatic approach to this generally understood phenomenon, harm reduction avoids taking a uniform stance that substance use is bad, but instead focuses on getting accurate and unbiased information on the harm of use to potential users, in order to help them make informed decisions about whether to use, and if they choose to use, what precautions to take to minimize their risk.”²⁷⁷

Harm reduction is a philosophy that underpins public health approaches to drugs and drug use, and attempts to reduce the harms of drug use without necessarily reducing drug use itself. Harm reduction acknowledges that there are inherent risks involved with a range of behaviours and that there are ways to reduce those risks. Harm reduction can also be understood in the context of a range of activities other than drug use, as simple as wearing sunscreen or wearing a helmet.

REDUCING CANNABIS-RELATED HARMS

In order to ensure cannabis education is suitable for all young people, discussing strategies to reduce the harms of cannabis use is of critical importance to supporting responsible and safe use among those youth who may choose to use cannabis. In 2017, the Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Misuse (CRISM) released an evidence-based guide on how to improve health and minimize risk for Canadians who use cannabis.²⁷⁸ The following discussion relies on CRISM's "Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines" (LRCUG), however, it is tailored to youth based on feedback from our content committee and contributors.

While abstinence and delaying the use of cannabis have been framed as harm reduction tools for young people, these may not be realistic for all youth and are somewhat out of alignment with the outlined definition of harm reduction. The harm reduction strategies below can arm

young people with some practical tips to mitigate or reduce the potential harms associated with cannabis use, and need not be mutually exclusive from encouraging young people to wait as long as possible to initiate cannabis use.

1. Start low and go slow

"Start low and go slow" refers to always beginning with low doses and waiting for the felt effects before consuming more. If someone has never used cannabis before, the effect may be stronger than for those who are occasional or frequent users of cannabis. Additionally, this applies to other cannabis products, particularly food products such as edibles, where an individual may have to wait up to one hour (or more) for the felt effects. Consuming too much cannabis can be uncomfortable and unpleasant, and may elevate feelings of anxiety. If this does happen, it could be helpful to stay hydrated, eat some food, and/or sleep it off.

2. Consider appropriate time and place

It's important to exercise judgment around where and when it's appropriate to use cannabis, which can help us think about what responsible cannabis use looks like. For example, using cannabis before school or work might impede on responsibilities, make

one less attentive, and it may make short-term recall more difficult. It can be important to also be aware of one's setting, and whether it's appropriate to use cannabis there.

3. Choose less risky cannabis products

If youth do choose to use cannabis, being aware of what products they are using and choosing lower risk products can help mitigate potential discomfort or harm. Avoiding high potency cannabis products, such as cannabis extracts, can help reduce harms, and using products that contain CBD has been shown to counteract some of the psychoactive effects of THC.

4. Choose safer methods of cannabis consumption

Smoking is the most common method of use among people who use cannabis. Smoking cannabis, which combusts and burns the plant material, poses more health risks to the respiratory system than other modes of administration. Safer methods can include vaporization, water bongs, or food products, which mitigate some of the risks of smoking. Vaporizing, for example, avoids many of the harsh chemicals found in combusted plant product.

Additionally, individuals may use a variety of materials to consume cannabis, such as aluminum pop cans, plastic bottles, and aluminum foil – and when heated, these materials can give off harmful chemicals. It's important to consider that the actual materials or equipment used to smoke cannabis can also be harmful.

5. Utilize safer smoking practices

This can include avoiding things like deep inhalation or holding in the cannabis smoke as long as possible, which can increase the toxic material absorbed by the lungs and body. A majority of THC in cannabis smoke is absorbed in the first few seconds so holding one's breath does not lead to an enhanced effect.²⁷⁹

6. Reduce the amount of cannabis used, and how frequently it is used

Using cannabis frequently, such as on a daily basis, demonstrates stronger links to more social and health risks. Encourage using cannabis less frequently, such as on weekends or a couple days a week. Often not captured by these discussions around daily use is the idea that some people may use just a little bit in the evenings before bed, while others may use chronically throughout the day. While using less frequently is a harm reduction strategy, using lower amounts can also be considered harm reduction.

7. Avoid synthetic cannabis altogether

While not as popular among youth in Canada, synthetic cannabis, commonly called “K2” or “spice,” has been shown to lead to severe health issues, and in some cases, death. Simply avoid synthetic cannabis products altogether, and use natural cannabis instead, which is less risky.

8. Avoid mixing cannabis with tobacco and alcohol

Encourage youth to avoid mixing cannabis with tobacco, where using tobacco with cannabis can increase the harms of smoking. Smoking tobacco increases the risk of cancer, cardiovascular diseases and respiratory diseases, among other diseases, and long-term exposure to second hand smoke from tobacco also causes cancer.²⁸⁰ Additionally, those who smoke both cannabis and tobacco often consume more than those who smoke tobacco or cannabis alone.²⁸¹

Using cannabis with alcohol typically elevates the felt effects of cannabis. If using cannabis, it’s best not to also mix substances – using cannabis and alcohol together can lead to increased impairment, dizziness and vomiting (or what is referred to as “greening out”).

9. Don’t drive high - have a plan for transportation before using cannabis

Driving impaired by cannabis can increase one’s risk of an accident. Recent self-report studies demonstrate that youth acknowledge cannabis as less impairing than alcohol, but the actual risk of impairment is often understated and misunderstood.²⁸² It is recommended to wait at least six hours (or more) after using cannabis before driving, and also be aware that combining alcohol and cannabis elevates impairment. Always have a plan for transportation before using cannabis (e.g., public transportation, calling a cab, friend, or parent). In addition, individuals should avoid

getting in the car with anyone who has used cannabis recently and may be impaired, as well as avoid using cannabis in vehicles.

10. Consider your risk profile and avoid using cannabis if pregnant

Risk profiles and vulnerabilities are important when considering whether to engage in cannabis use. For example, if a young person or a family member has a history of psychosis or substance use disorder, the risk of cannabis-related mental health problems increases²⁸³. Pregnant women should also consider avoiding cannabis use because of the potential harms to the developing baby, which are not yet fully understood.

Some youth have reported using cannabis in lieu of or as a substitution for other, more harmful drugs. While research is preliminary and growing in cohorts of adults, the idea of substitution – or the conscious choice made by users to use a less harmful drug, “instead of, or in conjunction with, another due to issues such as: perceived safety; level of addiction potential; effectiveness in relieving symptoms; access and level of acceptance”²⁸⁴ Canadian youth, for example, often frame alcohol as more harmful than cannabis, cannabis as less impairing, and report replacing alcohol with cannabis²⁸⁵ although more research is needed to understand this relationship.

