

conversation ahead of time, when you're both sober, to talk about things you are and aren't interested in trying. This conversation might include questions like:

- what sexual activities do we plan on doing?
- what sexual activities are we not okay with doing?
- how do the particular drug(s) we are taking affect how we feel, think or interact?
 - talking about explicit signals or words that mean stop i.e. "a safe word" or physical signals (like "thumbs down" to stop)

Because substances can make you feel differently from what you are used to, it can be helpful to keep in mind things that normally make you feel safe and good during sexual intercourse like:

- have snacks/water available to avoid hunger or dehydration
- take breaks frequently to avoid exhaustion
- using lube to reduce tears, cuts, or irritation
- use barriers like condoms for STI prevention or contraception to avoid pregnancy risk

Substances are not the only tools available for managing pain and enhancing pleasure during sex. Check out our pamphlet "Making Sex Feel Good" for some other ideas!

References:

- <http://tripproject.ca/safer-partying/sex-and-drugs/>
- <https://breakawaycs.ca/>
- <https://www.torontoindigenoushr.com/>
- <https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/health-wellness-care/health-programs-advice/supervised-injection-services/>

For youth ages 13-29

Planned Parenthood Toronto Health Services

Offers drop-in and scheduled appointments
Call 416-961-0113 or visit www.ppt.on.ca

For youth ages 13-19

Teen Health Source

Offers anonymous and confidential sexual health information for teens by teens.
Text (647) 933-5399, call (416) 961-3200, email teenhealthsource@ppt.on.ca
Chat online and visit www.teenhealthsource.com

Planned Parenthood Toronto is a United Way Member Agency and a Registered Charity,
No. 1190-94449-RR0001

Funding for Planned Parenthood Toronto has been provided by the Toronto Central Local Health Integration Network.

September 2024

sexual pleasure series

sex and substances

What are substances?

Substances are drugs that a person may choose to take that temporarily change how they think and/or feel. This could include substances like cocaine and ketamine but also alcohol, cannabis, and other prescription drugs. In this pamphlet, we will be talking about substances that are taken on purpose by a person who is choosing to take it. Dosing somebody with a drug against their will or without their knowledge is illegal and can cause serious harm. Since some substances are illegal to buy without a prescription and some substances are illegal to possess at all, using them may risk involvement with police.

What is sex?

In this pamphlet, the term "sex" is used to refer to any sexual behaviour, not just penetrative intercourse. Sex can mean different things to different people.

Why might a person choose to use substances?

Many different factors affect whether a person may choose to take substances, including but not limited to:

- reducing inhibitions to be able to relax and have fun
- because other people around them are using substances, or using the substance feels like the norm in a particular environment (e.g. a wedding, party, or cruise)
- feeling more (or less) in touch with their body
- to participate in tradition or culture (e.g. an Indigenous person using tobacco as part of ceremony)
- because they have a chemical dependence on that substance (i.e. would go into withdrawal if they did not take it) or physiological addiction.
- changing mental state (stay awake or alert for longer and have more energy, to help them get to sleep, to manage stress, fear and/or reduce pain)
- to feel connected to the earth/cosmos/spirituality, as a tool for healing, introspection, or creative inspiration
- because someone wants to use substances - there doesn't always have to be a justification!

What do substances have to do with sex?

Since substances are often used to manage feelings of pain or enhance feelings of pleasure, it is very common for people to use them as a part of their sexual activities. Whether you personally use substances or not, it is important to acknowledge the reality that people do use substances for sex and to be aware of how substances may affect the sex they have.

Why might a person take substances for sex?

Substances may be used to decrease pain, make sex more pleasurable, or give someone more energy.

A common reason that people have sex is for pleasure. Some people find that substances can enhance the amount or intensity of pleasurable feelings. For example, a person might find that the feeling of relaxation they get from cannabis helps them focus on the pleasurable sensations in their body while they are having sex.

Substances may be taken to manage either physical or psychological pain. For example a person might feel shy and nervous about sex and feel that drinking alcohol would help reduce this anxiety.

Someone may want more energy during sex, and may take stimulants like amphetamines to help them achieve this goal.

Substances have a wide array of effects depending on many factors such as dosage, setting, what drug it is, as well the current physical and mental state of the person taking the substance. The same drug can affect different people in different ways. Taking more than one substance at the same time can make the effects harder to predict.

What are the risks of taking substances for sex?

Depending on dosage, substances may

- change someone's mental state in an unpredictable or undesirable way
- interfere with a person's ability to read social cues (which can make negotiations around sex and consent hard)
- alter a person's perception so that risks (like an unplanned pregnancy, or catching an STI) seem less important
- make it hard to remember what has happened
- make a person less alert, coordinated, and responsive
- make it harder to achieve/maintain an erection, or to orgasm

- cause overdose or be a risk factor for other kinds of injury (e.g. car crash due to drunk driving)

Taking a prescription drug as prescribed by a health care provider is generally not intoxicating, but if you take more than prescribed or take prescription drugs intended for someone else, there can be a risk of overdose or unintended effects.

What if I want to use substances for sex?

If you plan on using substances for sex, being mindful of your dosage can reduce the chances of the substance causing harm. Since you can't "untake" a substance, it is helpful to take a lower dose of the substance and then increase the dose if needed later on to avoid taking too much. If you are new to a substance, your body may not be as familiar with it and react more strongly, which could put you at risk for overdose or negative side effects. It may also help to think about what effect you are hoping to get from the substance ahead of time and that this is the right choice for that goal. The intense bodily and emotional sensations that can come with sex may mean that you experience the effect of substances differently while having sex than while doing other activities.

It's also important to know where you got your substances from. Substances that are illegal to buy/possess are at a higher risk of containing other substances you may not want. There are drug checking resources available in Toronto, including test strips for substances that are at a higher risk for causing an overdose. If you are concerned that you may be at risk for overdosing, there are locations where you can take certain substances under the supervision of nurses or peer workers (called supervised consumption sites). These sites can help keep you safe by reversing overdoses and often offer drug checking services - please see the resource links for more information.

What if my partner(s) want to use substances for sex?

When having sex, it is important to have open lines of communication with your partner(s), and check in regularly to make sure that everybody involved feels good about what's happening. If your partner's use of substances is getting in the way of their ability to communicate their own needs, feel present in their body, or be able to check in with you about your needs and desires, it's probably not a good time to have sex together.

You may still want to stick to activities you have tried before and know you are both comfortable with. You may also want to have a