

## Drug Tolerance and Risk of Overdose

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected peoples' lives in many ways. Significant disruptions to daily routines, including the ways people access and use drugs, displacement from normal surroundings, COVID-related isolation, and more, can affect drug tolerance and lead to an increased risk of overdose, especially for people who use opioids.

### **What is Tolerance and Why Does it Matter?**

Tolerance is how your body adapts to regular use of a drug over time. As you develop tolerance to a drug, you will usually need more of it to feel the desired effect. If you have not developed a tolerance, or if your tolerance is lower, just a small amount of a drug can increase your risk of overdose.

Your tolerance decreases if you:

- Stop or take a break from using a drug
- Reduce the amount of drugs you use, even if only for a short time
- Change the type of drug you are using
- Change how you take your drugs
- Use drugs that are not as strong as you are used to, even if only for a short time

Changes in the drug supply can also affect tolerance, including:

- Shortages or inconsistent access to drugs
- Unpredictable changes in drug quality, purity and strength

It is important to remember that tolerance can also be affected by other factors including illness, stress, or new or different environments. People who have been recently released from jail, prison, or detention or have been discharged from the hospital or a drug treatment program are at increased risk of overdose because they may not have had access to drugs or medicines for opioid use disorder in these settings.

### **Protect Yourself From Overdose**

Think about how your drug use has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic and how this might affect your tolerance. Ask yourself:

- Have I been using less frequently?
- Have I been taking smaller doses?
- Have there been times when I stopped or took a break from using?
- Has the quality of the drugs I use changed?
- Have I changed what drugs I use?
- Have I changed how I take the drugs I use?
- As the City begins to reopen, am I likely to increase the amount I use?

- If I experience more stressors like job loss, death of a loved one, or housing insecurity, am I likely to increase the amount I use?

If you answered yes to any of the above questions, your tolerance may be affected. Always take steps to protect yourself from overdose, especially if your tolerance is lower.

- Plan ahead. Create an overdose safety plan with someone who knows you are going to use. A template can be found [here](#).
- Avoid using alone. Try to use with someone else and take turns using. If it is not possible to use with someone, consider calling the “Never Use Alone” hotline at 800-484-3731.
- When possible, buy from people you trust and ask about the drug quality.
- Talk to other people who also use drugs to hear their experience of what is available.
- Use fentanyl test strips to check for the presence of fentanyl before preparing your dose. For more information and to find fentanyl test strips, contact a [Syringe Service Program \(SSP\)](#) near you.
- Use less than you normally would and go slow.
- Carry [naloxone](#) and leave it somewhere visible each time you use.
- Avoid mixing drugs, including alcohol. If possible, use only one drug at a time.

## **Resources**

- SSPs are programs that provide services and sterile drug equipment to people who use drugs. Call your local SSPs to find out what services are being provided during the COVID-19 pandemic. Visit [nyc.gov/health](http://nyc.gov/health) and search for **syringe service programs**.
- To find naloxone near you, visit [nyc.gov/naloxone](http://nyc.gov/naloxone). Contact community-based programs and pharmacies about naloxone availability before visiting their locations, as hours and availability may have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- If you are interested in starting to use medicine to help manage your opioid use, speak to a medical or harm reduction provider. For information on NYC’s virtual buprenorphine clinic, call 212-562-2665.
- NYC Well staff can provide brief counseling and referrals to care in over 200 languages and are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. For support, call 888-NYC-WELL (888-692-9355), text "WELL" to 65173 or chat online by visiting [nyc.gov/nycwell](http://nyc.gov/nycwell).
- For resources that address issues such as financial help, food, health care or insurance coverage and more, see the [Comprehensive Resource Guide](#), or visit [nyc.gov/health/coronavirus](http://nyc.gov/health/coronavirus) and click on “Resources for New Yorkers.”