

Iowa Department of Public Health
Division of Behavioral Health/Bureau of Substance Abuse
Opioid Update: May 2021

The Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) offers the Opioid Update to share information about opioid use and Iowa's efforts to address the national opioid epidemic. Please feel free to submit topics to RaChel Greenwood at rachel.greenwood@idph.iowa.gov.

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Opioid News

HHS Releases New Buprenorphine Practice Guidelines Expanding Access to Treatment for Opioid Use Disorder

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recently released new buprenorphine practice guidelines that remove a longtime requirement cited by practitioners as a barrier to treatment.

"The spike we've seen in opioid involved deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic requires us to do all we can to make treatment more accessible." said Acting Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use Tom Coderre, who leads HHS's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). "Americans with this chronic disease need and deserve readily available access to life-saving, evidence-based treatment options. These new guidelines are an important step forward in reducing barriers to treatment and will ultimately help more people find recovery."

For more information about the new guidelines, please click this link: [HHS](#)

Topic of Significance: Harm Reduction

In the past few months, this newsletter has reported on the steady increase in the rates of both fatal and non-fatal opioid overdose. An evidence-based strategy proven to prevent opioid overdose is the concept of Harm Reduction. While many have heard the term harm reduction before, there may be some misperceptions about what it really means. Therefore, this month's Opioid Update is focused entirely on harm reduction.

What is Harm Reduction?

While there is no universally shared definition of harm reduction, it has been defined by Hawk et al. (2017), as "interventions aimed at reducing the negative effects of health behaviors without necessarily extinguishing the problematic health behaviors completely."

Harm reduction can be applied to a variety of health behaviors and can include everyday safety precautions such as wearing a seatbelt, applying sunscreen, and wearing a mask. It's important to note these interventions minimize the risk and severity of harm, without completely removing the potential harms from each behavior.

What are the principles of harm reduction in the context of drug/substance use?

The term harm reduction is interpreted in many ways. You can find widely recognized principles of harm reduction from the [National Harm Reduction Coalition](#) and a [qualitative study](#) on the conception of harm reduction in healthcare settings identified six principles:

1. *Humanism*: All people should be valued, cared for, respected, and dignified as individuals. People do things for a reason.
2. *Pragmatism*: None of us have perfect health behaviors.
3. *Individualism*: Everyone has their own needs and strengths.
4. *Autonomy*: Individuals know themselves and should make their own decisions.
5. *Incrementalism*: Any positive change is a step toward improved health, but backward movement is common.
6. *Accountability without termination*: Patients take responsibility, but do not get “fired” for not achieving goals.

What are the benefits of harm reduction?

- Reduce infectious disease transmission [Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Viral Hepatitis, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI's)];
- Increase access to substance use treatment services;
- Decrease drug overdoses and overdose deaths;
- Save money and support public safety;
- Help reduce stigma;
- Improve trust and engagement between people who use drugs, communities, and providers; and
- Improve holistic care.

Why is harm reduction sometimes controversial?

Harm reduction can be controversial as it is neither for, nor against, drug use. Rather, it centers on the needs of the individual and recognizes human behavior is complex and not easily changed. For example, the gold standard for removing the risk of potential harms resulting from sexual activity has historically been abstinence. But is this realistic? Similarly, harm reduction still aims to reduce potential harms knowing drug use is part of society.

Specific harm reduction interventions can also be controversial (medication-assisted treatment, naloxone distribution, syringe services programs) as some believe they promote substance use. However, most research states just the opposite and that harm reduction benefits not only individuals, but entire communities.

What can I do to incorporate harm reduction into my work?

- Educate yourself and others;
- Reach out to IDPH for training needs;
- Correct yourself and others when using stigmatizing language;
- Perform a language audit of all agency materials to update any potentially stigmatizing language;
- Involve people with lived experience in planning, implementing, and evaluating programs/policies/practices;
- Create a directory of, and referral process to, local resources (SUD treatment options, HIV/HCV/STI testing and treatment, Naloxone, Tele-PrEP, Housing, Mental Health, Social Services, etc.);
- Provide safer sex and harm reduction supplies/education for free to anyone walking in or out of your doors using best practices; and
- Provide resources and education on overdose prevention and safer use practices.

Where can I go to learn more about harm reduction?

For more information on Harm Reduction you can go to the [National Harm Reduction Coalition](#) website or contact Liz Sweet at liz.sweet@idph.iowa.gov.

Department News

Iowa's 44th Annual Governor's Conference on Substance Abuse

This annual event sponsored by the Iowa Department of Public Health will be hosted virtually this year from May 18th through May 20th. The purpose of this conference is to establish a meaningful dialogue among health professionals by focusing on trending topics, best practices and strategies for addressing barriers in behavioral health. Registration is open for both exhibitors and attendees.

For more information about this event, please click this link: [GCSA](#)