



PUBLIC HEALTH MEMO

COVID-19

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Interim Guidance for Harm Reduction and Social Service Providers

The COVID-19 pandemic is evolving rapidly, and this guidance is subject to change. Please visit the Windsor-Essex County Health Unit website (www.wechu.org) regularly for updates and additional information.

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness that spreads from person to person (close contact) through respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Our current understanding of it suggests that it is like other respiratory virus with regards to transmission. The majority of individuals with COVID-19 develop symptoms from mild to severe and most commonly include fever, cough or difficulty breathing. These symptoms develop within 2-14 days. Those at risk for COVID-19 include individuals who have recently travelled outside of Canada or those that have had close contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19. Close contacts of positive COVID-19 cases will be contacted by the WECHU.

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is specific for Harm Reduction and Social Service providers working with people who use drugs and it advises on best practices that can be implemented to prevent COVID-19 infection among high-risk groups such as people who use substances. Harm reduction providers include but are not limited to addiction and mental health treatment services, needle and syringe sharing programs and housing services for homeless population.

What is the role of Harm Reduction Service Providers in responding to COVID-19?

Drug use increases a person's risk of contracting COVID-19 as it can negatively impact the body immune response, making its victim more susceptible to infectious diseases such as COVID-19. More so, people who use drugs are more likely to disregard physical distancing instructions as they would likely share drug stash bags and injectable and non-injectable equipment. Thus, Harm Reduction and Social Service Providers play a role in ensuring that their clients are well educated about COVID-19, while also providing them with access to essential services within a clean and safe environment.

Responding to an opioid overdose at your facility

- Call emergency responders (9-1-1) and administer naloxone while you await their arrival. Identify if the client has any symptoms of respiratory illness or has been tested for COVID-19
- Be sure to clear the area from anyone not responding to the crisis
- Employees responding to the situation should protect themselves by wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gown, face mask, goggles and gloves
- For emergency resuscitation, use chest compression or other life-saving techniques such as applying jaw thrusts or using the position of safety.
- Consider planning for no Bag-Valve-Mask ventilation resuscitation technique in order to eliminate the risk of transmitting aerosolized virus.

Measures to protect clients at your facility from exposure to COVID-19

Ensuring continuity of service

- Create contingency plans for potential medication and equipment shortages
- Consider planning for potential staff shortages by developing flexible attendances and sick-leave policies, identifying critical job functions and cross-training employees to fill the roles
- If necessary, consider making alternatives to face-to-face, individuals or group appointments



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Facility Screening and Intake Protocols

- Restrict visiting times to essential employees
- Limit access to facility only to clients and essential employees
- Place signage and posters at facility entrances instructing visitors with symptoms of respiratory illness for COVID-19 not to visit the facility
- Actively screen clients when entering the building using the Ontario online self-assessment tool
- Isolate clients showing symptoms of respiratory illness with fever from others in the facility
- Provide facemasks to clients showing respiratory symptoms and ensure that they receive necessary medical attention if their situation worsens
- Make provision for clients who are quarantining to have a buddy who does not show signs of a respiratory illness assist them in picking up their medications

Harm reduction tips for safer drug use

- Educate clients on risky behaviors to avoid when using drugs such as sharing needles, joints, cigarettes, stash bags and snorting pipes.
- Educate clients by offering one-on-one education using information pamphlets and brochures or organize virtual classes using live or pre-recorded audio and videos.
- Educate clients about the danger posed by inhalation drugs and their increased risk of susceptibility to COVID-19. Topics of interest may include information on COVID-19 symptoms, how the disease is transmitted, cough and sneeze etiquettes, handwashing and use of personal protective equipment.
- Discourage clients from engaging in unhygienic practices such as using saliva or urine to prepare their drugs or having people assist them in preparing their drugs.
- Educate clients on proper disposal of used alcohol swabs, needles, paper towels and ensure that waste bins are kept in locations that are visible and readily accessible

Educate clients

- Inform clients about physical distancing and recommend that they avoid close contact with others touching, kissing, handshaking and hugging
- Educate clients about how to safely use personal protective equipment such as face masks
- Educate clients on proper hand washing procedures and cough etiquettes
- Limiting gatherings to no more than 5 persons and ensure physical distancing is maintained
- Educate clients on signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and seek medical help as necessary.

Recommendations for Physical Distancing: Housing

- For more information on physical distancing in a homecare setting, please refer to [Information for Shelters and Long-term Care Homes](#), [Ministry of Health](#) guidance for working in a homecare setting and [BC Housing](#)

Maintain essential supplies for people who inject drug

- Ensure clients are provided with sterile and safety engineered needles, cooker, water and alcohol swabs for each injection

Facility Readiness: Signage, Staffing

- Ensure that there is adequate staffing at the facility
- Display handwashing and other relevant signs and posters at all entrances, washrooms and common areas. Posters may contain captions such as “Cover Your Cough”, “Don’t share stash bags”, “Don’t share snorts”.
- Consider streaming demo videos in the facility’s common areas on personal safety topics such as handwashing etiquette and safe drug handling.
- Provide clients at the facility with hand soaps, paper towels, hand sanitizers and personal protective equipment.



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Housekeeping

- Clean and disinfect the facility regularly including frequently touched surfaces such as doorknobs and handles, handrails, telephones
- Ensure that sleeping rooms, common rooms and waiting areas are well ventilated.
- Advise cleaning staff to avoid hugging laundry before it is washed to avoid self-contamination

References

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