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## Living with HIV

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### HIV and Drug and Alcohol Use

Last Reviewed: July 31, 2019

#### Key Points

- Drug and alcohol use can lead to risky behaviors that increase the chances of getting HIV or passing it on to others (called [HIV transmission](#)). For example, a person using drugs or alcohol may have sex without a [condom](#) or share needles when injecting drugs.
- Drug and alcohol use can harm the health of a person with HIV. Specifically, drug and alcohol use can weaken the [immune system](#) and damage the [liver](#).
- People with HIV take a combination of HIV medicines (called an [HIV treatment regimen](#)) every day to stay healthy. Drug or alcohol use can make it hard to focus and stick to a daily HIV regimen. Skipping HIV medicines allows HIV to multiply and damage the immune system.
- [Drug interactions](#) between HIV medicines and recreational drugs can increase the risk of dangerous side effects.

### What is the connection between HIV and drug and alcohol use?

Drug and alcohol use is related to HIV in the following ways:

- Use of alcohol and recreational drugs can lead to risky behaviors that increase the chances of getting HIV or passing it on to others (called [HIV transmission](#)). Recreational drugs include

injection and non-injection drugs such as opioids (including heroin), methamphetamine (meth), crack cocaine, and inhalants.

- Drug and alcohol use can harm the health of a person with HIV. Specifically, drug and alcohol use can weaken the [immune system](#) and damage the [liver](#).

## How does drug and alcohol use increase the risk of HIV infection?

Drugs and alcohol affect the brain, making it hard to think clearly. People using drugs or alcohol may make poor decisions and take risks.

Some risky behaviors can increase the risk of getting or transmitting HIV. For example, a person using drugs or alcohol may have sex without a [condom](#) or share needles when injecting drugs.

In the United States, HIV is spread mainly by:

- Having anal or vaginal sex with someone who has HIV without using a condom or taking medicines to prevent or treat HIV
- Sharing injection drug equipment (works), such as needles, with someone who has HIV

## How can drug and alcohol use affect a person with HIV?

Drug and alcohol use can harm the health of a person with HIV in several ways.

### **Drugs and alcohol can weaken the immune system.**

HIV damages the immune system, making it harder for the body to fight infections and certain cancers. Drug or alcohol use can further damage the immune system and cause HIV infection to worsen.

### **Drugs and alcohol can damage the liver and cause liver disease.**

One of the main functions of the liver is to remove harmful substances (toxins) from the blood. Toxins are produced when the liver breaks down the chemicals in drugs or alcohol.

Drug and alcohol use can damage the liver, making it work harder to remove toxins from the body. The buildup of toxins can weaken the body and lead to liver disease.

### **Some recreational drugs can interact with HIV medicines.**

[Drug interactions](#) between HIV medicines and recreational drugs can increase the risk of dangerous side effects. For example, overdoses due to interactions between some HIV medicines and drugs such as ecstasy (MDMA) or GHB have been reported.

### **Drug and alcohol use can make it hard to take HIV medicines every day.**

People with HIV take a combination of HIV medicines (called an [HIV treatment regimen](#)) every day to stay healthy. Drug or alcohol use can make it hard to focus and stick to a daily HIV regimen. Skipping HIV medicines allows HIV to multiply and damage the immune system.

## If you use drugs or drink alcohol, take the following steps to protect your health.

*If you use drugs or alcohol:*

- Don't have sex if you're high.
- Use a condom correctly every time you have sex. Read this fact sheet from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on [how to use condoms correctly](#).

*If you drink alcohol:*

- Drink in moderation. Moderate drinking is up to 1 drink per day for women and up to 2 drinks per day for men. One drink is a 12-oz bottle of beer, a 5-oz glass of wine, or a shot of liquor.
- Visit [Rethinking Drinking](#), a website from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). This website can help you evaluate your drinking habits and consider how alcohol may be affecting your health.

*If you inject drugs:*

- Use only new, sterile needles and drug injection equipment (works) each time you inject.
- Never share needles and works.
- Visit CDC's webpage on [HIV prevention](#) for more information on how to reduce the risk of getting or transmitting HIV from injection drug use.

## This fact sheet is based on information from the following sources:

From CDC:

- [Injection Drug Use and HIV Risk](#)
- [HIV and Substance Use in the United States](#)
- [HIV Basics: Prevention](#)

From the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS):

- Guidelines for the Use of Antiretroviral Agents in Adults and Adolescents with HIV: [Substance Use Disorders and HIV](#)

From the Department of Veterans Affairs:

- [Drugs, Alcohol, and HIV](#)

From HHS and the U.S. Department of Agriculture:

- [2015 – 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans: Appendix 9. Alcohol](#)

From the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA):

- [How Does Drug Abuse Affect the HIV Epidemic?](#)