

Stimulants and Health | Guide

Using the *Stimulants and Health* handout

This guide is designed for care teams—including harm reduction specialists, peers, outreach staff, clinicians, and others who provide care to people who use stimulants—to use when reviewing the [Stimulants and Health](#) education handout. It offers information to **help you discuss safer use, health goals, and treatment options with people who use stimulants.**

Talking to People Who Use Stimulants About Their Health

Getting started

Everyone deserves to be involved in decisions about their own health, including people who use stimulants like methamphetamine or cocaine. In addition to general health education, people who use stimulants should also learn about how stimulants can affect their health and ways to reduce risks. This helps them make informed choices about their use and care. This information is important to share whether or not someone wants to reduce or stop using stimulants.

While there are no FDA-approved medicines for treating stimulant use disorder, there are ways to reduce health risks. These include:

- **Safer use strategies:** Help reduce the risk of overamping, overdose, infectious diseases, and other health problems related to stimulant use.
- **Health care interventions:** Help reduce long-term health risks from stimulant use.
- **Support for stopping or reducing use:** Includes medicine, counseling, or rewards programs.

People who use stimulants might not know all the ways to support their health. You can start the conversation by asking someone about their health priorities and concerns. These conversations are a chance to educate, engage, and support their health and well-being, and also provide a clear sign you want to keep working with them regardless of their stimulant use.

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Support for people who use cocaine and methamphetamine

Safer use tips
There are ways to be safer, even if you do not want to change how often or how much you use:

- **People use stimulants for many reasons**
Ask yourself:
 - What do I like about using stimulants?
 - Is there anything I want to change?
 - How can I feel healthier?Understanding why you use can help you decide if you want to reduce or stop.
There are always things that you can do to protect your health.

- **Health effects of stimulants**
Stimulants used in high doses over time can harm the heart and brain.
Stimulant use can lead to high blood pressure and heart disease.
It can also cause hallucinations, mood changes and trouble thinking.

Safer use tips:

- Try to get sleep or set aside time to rest.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Eat before and while you're using, even if you don't feel hungry.
- Consider changing how you use, like smoking instead of injecting.
- Avoid sharing smoking or injecting supplies.
- Use in a safe place with people you trust.
- Test your drugs, you can't always know what you're getting.
- Carry naloxone, you might save a life.

Download the handout:

learnabouttreatment.org/download/2455

Ask

Start by asking about the person's experience with stimulants. Ask what they know about how stimulants affect the body, what they like about stimulants, and if there is anything they want to change about their use. Some sample wording is provided below.

Avoid judgmental language. Use their words (e.g., "taking a break" vs. "quitting").

Reflect, summarize, and clarify. Active listening helps avoid misunderstandings.

For example, "treatment" can mean different things to different people. Ask questions like, "Tell me more about what 'treatment' means to you," to make sure you understand each other.



Photo from *UW ADAI Empathy Lens Collection*

Explore and educate

Ask them what they know about how stimulants affect their bodies and how they can reduce risks. Offer information where there are gaps in knowledge. Talk about:

- Physical health impacts
- Mental health impacts
- Safer use tips

Support and empower

Let *them* guide the conversation and use this handout to provide options. Let them know you support whatever decisions they make.

If your organization offers services that meet people's needs, help connect them. For services you don't offer, provide referrals and warm hand-offs to community partners who can help. Having a list of partners and resources in their area will help you provide accurate and relevant referrals. A great way to build your community resources is to ask to visit partner sites and invite them to visit your organization.

The next section covers the [Stimulants and Health](#) handout step-by-step, including how to talk about stimulant use with people, safer use tips, health effects of stimulants, and support for reducing stimulant use.

Using the Handout: Addressing Health Priorities or Concerns

1. People use stimulants for many reasons

By understanding someone’s thoughts on their stimulant use and what *they* think are the pros and cons of using, you can help them meet their health goals. Start by asking open-ended questions to learn about their goals, hopes, and thoughts about their stimulant use.

Sample questions:

“What do you like about using stimulants?”

“Is there anything you’d like to change about your stimulant use?”

“What would help you feel healthier?”

Talking about what they like and don’t like about using stimulants can help someone decide what changes they want to make, if any.

Whether or not the person wants to change their use, there are options. Let them know that if they want to quit, cut back, or keep using stimulants, there are ways to support and improve their health. And, let them know you welcome them back whether they feel like they’re doing well or not.

2. Health effects of stimulants

Heart and blood vessels

Stimulants can harm the heart and blood vessels in both the short and long term.

In the short term, they can make blood vessels tighten suddenly, which can lead to a heart attack or stroke. Over time, they cause swelling and damage inside the body, which raises the risk of heart disease, stroke, heart attack, and heart failure.

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1

People use stimulants for many reasons

Ask yourself:

- What do I like about using stimulants?
- Is there anything I want to change?
- How can I feel healthier?

Understanding why you use can help you decide if you want to reduce or stop.

There are always things that you can do to protect your health.

2

Health effects of stimulants

Stimulants used in high doses over time can harm the heart and brain.

Stimulant use can lead to high blood pressure and heart disease.

It can also cause hallucinations, mood changes and trouble thinking.

Try to get sleep or set aside time to rest.

Drink plenty of water.

Eat before and while you’re using, even if you don’t feel hungry.

Consider changing how you use, like smoking instead of injecting.

Avoid sharing smoking or injecting supplies.

Use in a safe place with people you trust.

Test your drugs. you can’t always know what you’re getting.

Carry naloxone. you might save a life.

How can you and your health care provider support your health? 4

- Treat high blood pressure to prevent heart disease and stroke.
- Care for your teeth and oral health.
- Treat wounds or other skin concerns.
- Screen for and treat STIs, HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C.
- Consider pre- and post-exposure medicine to prevent HIV and STIs.
- Consider birth control and pregnancy testing if pregnancy is possible.
- Stay up to date on vaccinations.
- Treat other substance use and mental health concerns.

5

Reducing stimulant use

Cutting back on stimulants can be hard, but there are options to help you feel better and help you reduce your use.

Medications

Talk to your provider about medications that can help you feel better and may help you cut back on your use.

Contingency management

Some programs provide rewards to people when they reduce or stop using stimulants. Some people are able to stop using this way, many others can cut back.

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Updated December 2025 | Adapted from craas.org | Online guide to using this handout: bit.ly/StimHealthGuide



Emergency signs include chest pain, shortness of breath, a racing heart rate, slurred or jumbled speech, unable to walk or move, numb limbs, a splitting headache, confusion, shaking, and unable to wake up. If these signs occur, *call 911*. You can describe the person’s symptoms and indicate it’s urgent, but you don’t have to say you think it’s drug related to the 911 dispatcher.

Brain and mood

Stimulants increase a neurochemical called dopamine in the brain, which can cause a person to feel really good, but can also cause hallucinations, delusions, paranoia, anxiety, depression, and other mood changes.

Stimulants can also affect memory and decision-making. Injuries, fights, and motor vehicle crashes can all happen due to stimulant use.

Mental health crisis: Stimulants may increase the risk of harm to oneself or others. If you believe someone is at risk of harming themselves or others, *call 911* and state that they are experiencing a mental health crisis (Espiridion & Charron, 2024; McKetin et al., 2014).

Sample script:

“You mentioned feeling like your heart is racing. Methamphetamine can cause these types of symptoms. What do you know about how meth affects the heart and blood vessels?”

3. Safer use tips

For those who are not interested or ready to stop using stimulants, these tips can help reduce harm:

- **Sleep/rest:** Sleep is important for health, but it can be hard to get when using stimulants. Setting aside time to sleep, or resting in a quiet, safe place, can help the brain.
- **Hydration:** Stimulants can cause dehydration. Drinking water and other drinks with electrolytes helps prevent dehydration.
- **Nutrition:** Stimulants reduce appetite, leading to weight loss and malnutrition. Eating small amounts, even when not hungry, is helpful. Nutritious foods high in protein are ideal. Soft foods and liquid nutrition can help.
- **Safer ways to use:** Smoking or eating drugs is safer than injecting.
- **Avoid sharing supplies:** Sharing injection, inhalation, and smoking supplies can spread infectious diseases. Provide these supplies onsite if possible or refer to a community partner (doh.wa.gov/you-and-your-family/drug-user-health/syringe-service-programs).

- **Use in safe places with people you trust:** Being with trusted people and in safe environments helps people feel secure. Ask the person what this looks like for them.
- **Test drugs & carry naloxone:** Drugs can be mixed with unexpected substances like fentanyl. Provide fentanyl test strips and referrals to drug checking services. Share the latest information on what's in the local drug supply (adai.uw.edu/cedeer/drugchecking). Encourage people to carry naloxone and remind them that someone else needs to be present to administer it in case of an overdose.

Overamping



Overamping happens when the effects of a stimulant become overwhelming, sometimes called a stimulant overdose. It can lead to heart attack, stroke, seizure, or overheating, but overamping is not always life-threatening.

Contributing factors can include:

- Lack of sleep
- Not eating or drinking enough
- Being in a different environment or with people you don't trust
- Using too much
- Mixing stimulants with other substances

Source: stopoverdose.org/basics/methamphetamine-overdose-overamping

4. How can you and your health care provider support your health?

No matter if someone wants to stop or cut back on stimulant use, there are ways to support their health (CIAO SFDPH, 2024). Here are some interventions to discuss with their healthcare team:

- ❑ **Blood pressure management:** Stimulants tighten blood vessels, causing inflammation and high blood pressure. Treating chronic high blood pressure with medication and lifestyle changes can reduce the risks of heart disease, heart attack, and stroke.
- ❑ **Oral and dental health:** Methamphetamine reduces saliva production, increasing mouth acidity and risk of tooth decay, gum disease, and infections. Interventions include:
 - Brushing teeth with fluoride toothpaste and flossing.
 - Drinking water to stay hydrated.
 - Chewing sugar-free gum.
 - Rinsing the mouth with water.
 - Connecting with a dentist for routine and acute care.

❑ **Wounds and skin:** Stimulants affect blood flow and may slow wound healing. Stimulant use can cause dehydration, causing dry skin. And people who use stimulants may pick at or scratch their skin, leading to skin breakdown and infection. Interventions include:

- Asking them if they have skin or wound concerns.
- Referring to the health care team for assessment and care.
- Providing wound care kits.

❑ **Screening for STIs, HIV, Hep B, and Hep C:**

These infections can be transmitted sexually or through shared drug supplies. Screening helps with early detection and treatment.

Interventions include:

- Offering safer use supplies and education about the risks of sharing drug use supplies.
- Referring to the health care team for screening and treatment.

❑ **Pre- and post-exposure medicine for HIV and STIs:** Medications to prevent HIV and STIs are available. Interventions include:

- Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP): Emergency antiretroviral medications taken within 72 hours of exposure to HIV to prevent infection with the virus, taken daily for 28 days.
- Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP): Antiretroviral medication taken to prevent HIV infection in people at risk.
- Doxycycline Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (Doxy-PEP): Antibiotic medication taken within 72 hours after potential exposure to prevent bacterial STIs.

❑ **Pregnancy testing and birth control:** Offer pregnancy testing and birth control to people who may become pregnant. Interventions include:

- Connect with an OBGYN experienced in supporting people who use drugs if the pregnancy test is positive.
- Engaging in shared decision-making to help them choose their best birth control option.

❑ **Vaccinations:** Vaccines save lives by protecting individuals and building community immunity. Encourage people to stay up to date on their vaccinations.



Photo from UW ADAI Empathy Lens Collection

❑ Treating co-morbid mental health and substance use disorders:

- Connect with the health care team if the person reports co-morbid mental health and substance use disorder symptoms.
- Medications for opioid use disorder, like buprenorphine and methadone, should be started or continued for anyone with opioid use disorder. These medications can improve the health of a person even if they continue using stimulants.
- Antipsychotic medications may be offered to manage psychotic symptoms, like hallucinations and delusions (Fluyau et al., 2019).

Staying healthy: tips from people who use meth



“Eat before and while you’re high, even if you don’t feel hungry. Coffee and energy drinks aren’t food.”

“Drink plenty of water. I set my phone alarm to remind me.”

“Take any medications you’re prescribed, especially if you have some for heart problems or high blood pressure.”

“Be with people who know you and can tell if you need help.”

“Use in a place where you feel safe.”

“Don’t stay high for too long. Get some sleep.”

“Meth lasts a long time in your body. If you feel close to your limit, don’t use more.”

“Before you take that first hit, have your food and water ready, know what you’re going to do when you’re high, how you will keep yourself safe, how and where you’re gonna crash.”

Source: stopoverdose.org/basics/methamphetamine-overdose-overamping

5. Reducing stimulant use

Contingency management

Contingency management (CM) is a proven method for treating stimulant use disorder. It uses rewards to motivate people to reach their treatment goals. Rewards may include gift cards, vouchers, or prizes. Studies show that CM can reduce stimulant use, cravings, new use, and risky behaviors related to HIV (Brown & DeFulio, 2020; Ginley et al., 2021; ASAM 2024).

- How it works: Participants earn rewards for negative drug tests.
- Why it helps: Immediate rewards and celebration encourage positive behavior changes, like reducing or stopping stimulant use.

Even though there is good proof that CM helps treat stimulant use disorder, only a few programs use it right now, and other types of support might be easier to find.

Psychosocial support

Other types of support that can help include:

- Counseling: Techniques like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Community Reinforcement Approach (CRA), and motivational interviewing.
- Peer groups: Programs like 12-step groups, SMART Recovery, and groups for people who use stimulants.

Medications

There are no FDA-approved medications for stimulant use disorder, and evidence for off-label use is limited. However, there may be medications that help people feel better and cut back on their use.

Medications that health care providers may offer:

- Bupropion, Mirtazapine, or Long-Acting Injectable Naltrexone plus Bupropion may be used to help people **stop and/or reduce methamphetamine use** (Colfax et al., 2011; Elkashef et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2018; Trivedi et al., 2021).
- Topiramate, Bupropion, Disulfiram, Modafinil, or Long-Acting Amphetamines may be used to help people **stop and/or reduce cocaine use** (Chan et al., 2019; Dackis et al., 2012; Kampman et al.; 2025; Traccis et al., 2024).

“Sample script:

“If you want to cut back or take a break from using, there are a few options. Some programs offer rewards for meeting goals; counseling can help, and while there aren’t any meds specifically for stimulants, some people find certain prescriptions useful. What do you think would be helpful for you?””

Wrapping Up

Supporting the health and well-being of people who use stimulants starts with open and kind conversations. It's important to focus on reducing harm. Whether someone wants to use less, stop completely, or use more safely, there are ways to lower risks and improve health. Talking about physical and mental health, giving practical tips for safer use, and connecting people to resources like doctors, counselors, support programs, and other care can help individuals make the best choices for themselves.

“ **Sample script:**

“What resonates with you? Where do you want to focus?”

“You’re the expert on your life. I’m here to help with whatever you choose.””

Remember: Small steps matter. Every health talk, every referral, and every safer use tip can make a big difference. Your job is to meet people where they are, support their goals, and show them that their health is important, no matter how they use stimulants. By supporting someone’s health and prioritizing their health goals, we build trust and ongoing engagement in care.

For more information or resources, visit LearnAboutTreatment.org, contact us at adai@uw.edu, and connect with your local harm reduction programs.

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