

# SAFER INJECTING

...reducing the harm associated with injecting drug use...



# CONTENTS

**This guide is aimed at people who inject drugs to help reduce some of the problems caused by injecting.**

**It includes information on safer injecting practices and types of injecting.**

**Advice on how to find a vein and the equipment that should be used.**

**Recommendations on how to best care for your veins, avoiding vein damage and when you may need to seek help.**

**Strategies for coping with overdose and information on HIV and hepatitis (Hep) B & C.**

**Suggestions of alternatives to injecting and advice in relation to poly drug use.**

**Finally, there are details of where you can get further information.**

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# SAFER INJECTING TIPS

## ways to reduce risks

### Remember before you inject

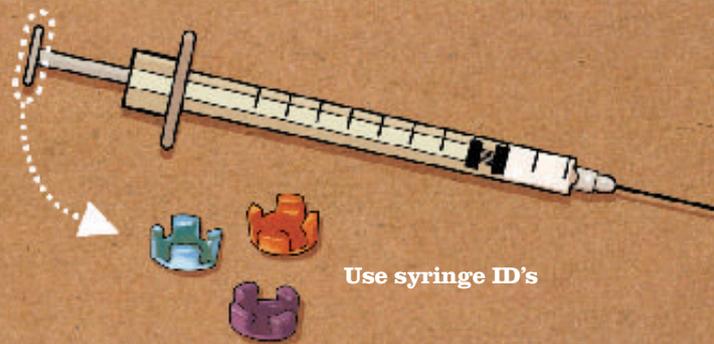
- Get your own works from your local needle exchange.
- Ask in your needle exchange for syringe markers/ID's.
- Never share needles or works with another drug user not even your partner, boyfriend or girlfriend.
- Try not to use alone.

### Remember when injecting

- Wash your hands first.
- Don't lick the needle. There are bacteria in your mouth which can get on the needle.
- Always inject yourself.
- Take your time. Rushing can mean you make a mistake.
- If sore take the needle out and start again, always using a clean needle.
- Do not swab the area after injecting, just apply pressure.
- Front or back loading is only ok if all equipment is known to be previously unused. (see page 24)
- If there is clotted blood in syringe consider using the 'up your bum' method. (see page 32)
- Learn to inject with both hands.

### DID YOU KNOW?

**MQI** run  
*Safer Injecting  
Workshops.*  
Ask staff for more  
information.



### TIP:

**Avoid mix-ups, always mark your syringe**

# TYPES OF INJECTING

## into the vein {intravenous}

### Remember

- Always inject in the direction of the heart.
- Never inject into a pulse. A pulse means an artery.
- Always follow safer injecting tips. (see page 4)
- Vein care is very important. (see page 16)

### Risks:

- Blood borne viruses HIV, Hep B & C and many other health problems.
- Abscesses, infections, blood clots & Deep Venous Thrombosis (DVT).
- Overdose: Make sure to test the dose and don't inject alone.
- There is as high risk of gangrene if you inject into a pulse/an artery...

If you hit a pulse/artery blood will be bright red and you may feel pressure against the plunger.

**Apply pressure for 15 mins, raise the affected limb and go to your G.P/or Local Health Centre. If it won't stop bleeding or you are worried call 999.**

### Recommended needle size:

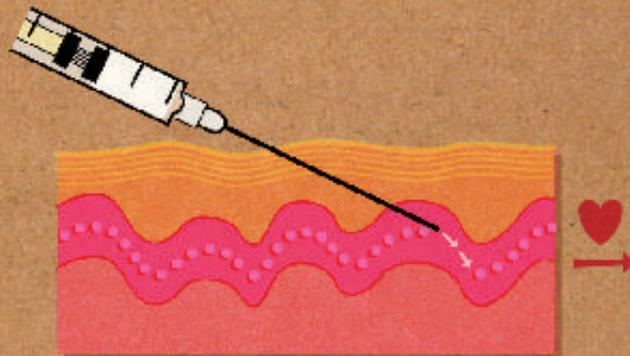
Baby brown for hands and feet.

Brown and diabetic for arms.

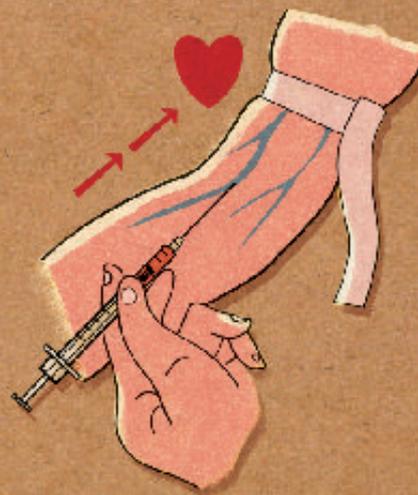
(Ask staff for more information)

### DID YOU KNOW?

Injecting into any vein is also called *mainlining*.



**Always inject in direction of heart**



### TIP:

**The bigger the needle size the greater the chance that you will damage your veins.**

# TYPES OF INJECTING

## skin popping {subcutaneous}

### Remember

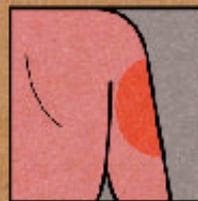
- The drug is slower to take effect when you use this way, so be patient.
- It is suitable for short-term use only as any bacteria or irritant (e.g. citric or vitamin c) lies close to the skin surface and easily causes abscesses and infections.
- Always follow safer injecting tips. (see page 4)
- Very important to rotate the injecting sites.

### Risks

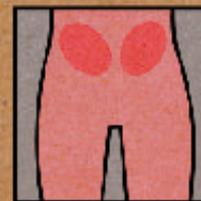
- Drug absorbed slowly. This can give germs time to damage skin near where needle went in.
- It can cause abscess and infections easily.
- Always inject yourself.
- May lead to lumps and bumps and long term damage.

### Recommended needle size

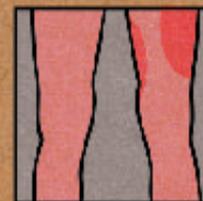
Diabetic.



upper arm



stomach



thigh

### DID YOU KNOW?

**SKIN POPPING**  
is injecting just  
under the skin.

### TIP:

Always swab the area before injecting.

# TYPES OF INJECTING

## into the muscle {intramuscular}

### Remember

- This can leave the muscle sore and stiff.
- The drug is slower to take effect when you use this method.
- It is not a good choice for using a lot.
- Always follow safer injecting tips (see page 4)
- Steroids are used this way.
- Contact your local needle exchange for more information.

### Risks

- Deep painful abscesses.

If the wrong needle size is used there is risk of the needle snapping because the muscle tenses as you inject.

If this happens go straight to the local **Accident and Emergency Department**.

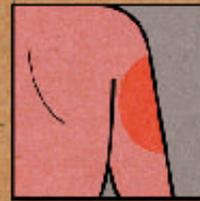
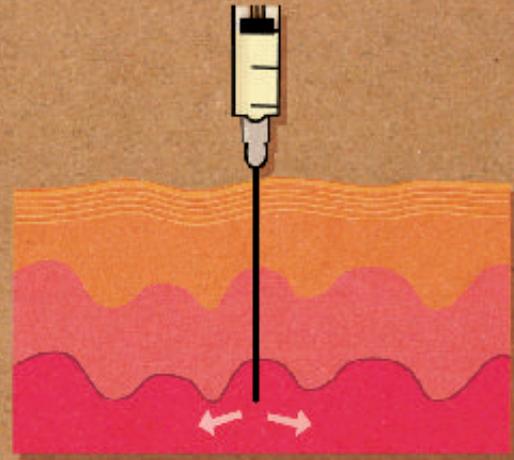
### Recommended Needle Size

Green and Blue. Depends on your muscle mass. Ask staff.

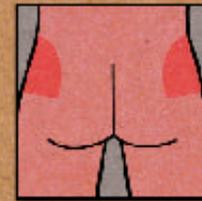
### DID YOU KNOW?

**INTRAMUSCULAR** involves injecting deep into the muscle.

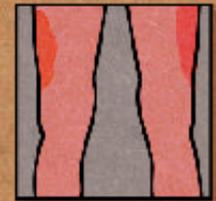
inject deep into muscle



upper arm



hips

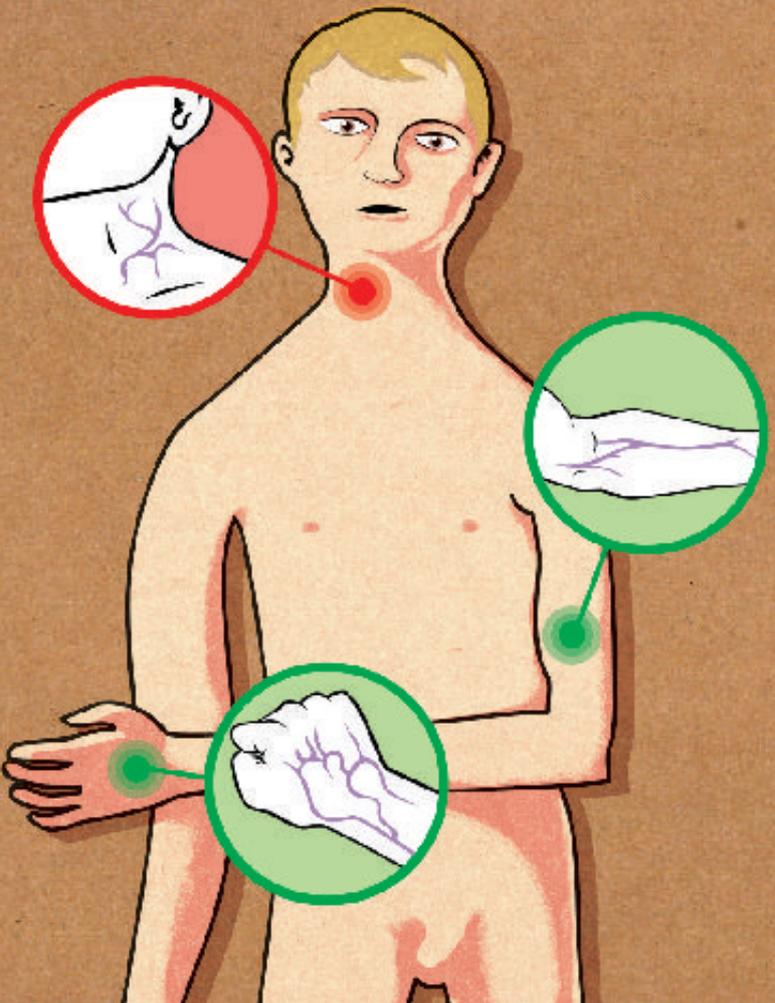


thigh

### TIP:

**Avoid injecting into the butt/bum muscles as you can't see if you are doing any damage.**

# FINDING A VEIN



## NECK - this is a high risk area

- There is a big vein and a big artery here.

### RISKS:

- Hit the big artery and you could have severe bleeding.
- Swelling blocking your airway.
- Clots in your big vein very near your heart which could stop you breathing.
- Nerve damage and potential for an abscess in the neck.

## ARM

- The lower you start the longer the veins will last.

### RISKS:

- Abscesses & infections.
- Missed hits.

## HAND

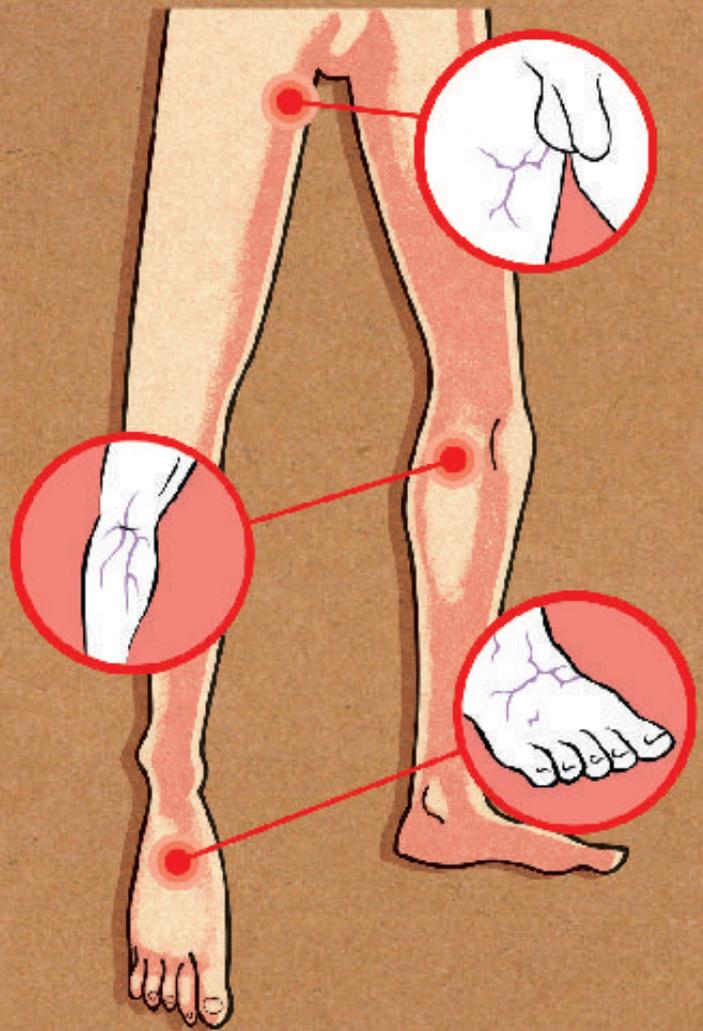
- Avoid use of fingers and palm of hand.
- Remember to take your rings off.
- Hands have thin veins, be gentle.
- Do not use wrist - big artery, veins, and nerves here.

### RISKS:

- If you leave a ring on, the swelling can stop the flow of blood and you could lose a finger.

**TIP:** If you have to try a few times to find a vein always use a clean needle for each attempt.

# FINDING A VEIN



## GROIN - this is a high risk area

### RISKS:

- Huge vein, nerve and artery into the groin. They crossover each other.
- Hit the big artery and you could have severe bleeding.
- Lots of germs here that can be passed into the body when injecting.
- Other risks include abscesses, blood poisoning, and loss of limb due to gangrene.

## LEGS - this is a high risk area

### RISKS:

- Are difficult to access especially behind the knees. They don't usually last for long.
- Injecting into varicose (swollen veins on legs) leads to ulcers.
- Risks of long-term abscesses, leg swelling and other infections.
- The highest risk of clots are in the legs.

## FEET - this is a high risk area

### RISKS:

- Lots of germs here. Swab well.
- Small veins so inject slowly. Only use short-term. Can lead to very painful feet.
- Infection and swelling. This can be very slow to heal. Seek medical help.

## TIP:

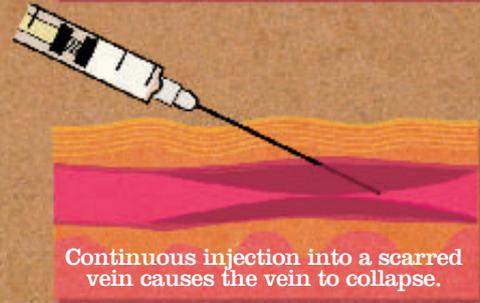
The penis, the armpit and breasts are also particularly dangerous sites.

# VEIN CARE

## Remember

- Start as low as possible.
- Use tourniquet which is elasticised. Do not use a lace or belt as this can twist veins. Tourniquets available in **MQI**.
- Use small needle as this will cause less damage to vein.
- Where possible use new needle and syringe and sterile water every time.
- If you have to reuse a syringe, only reuse your own.
- Inject slowly.
- Remove needle slowly to prevent vein collapse.
- Learn to inject with both hands.
- Always inject yourself.
- Use only a small amount of citric acid.

## FIBROSED VEIN / COLLAPSED VEIN



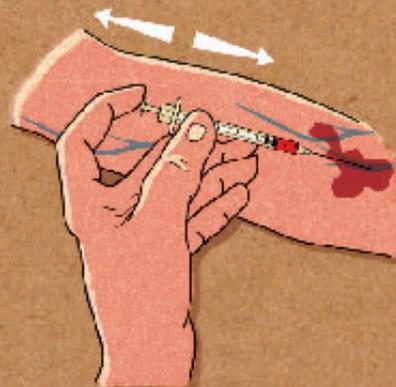
**TIP:**

**Rotate sites to let veins recover.**

# VEIN DAMAGE

Vein damage is caused by

- Repeated use of the same area/site.
- Using old needles or blunt needles.
- Using wrong tourniquet.
- Flushing veins which can cause clots and block veins. You do not get an extra buzz from flushing.
- Using lemon or vinegar. This can cause infections and lead to blindness or kidney damage.
- Using too much citric will irritate and damage the vein. Only use a small amount.
- Missed hits which occur when you miss the vein and inject into the tissue surrounding the area. This can cause an infection and abscesses.
- Injecting tablets will seriously damage your veins.
- See Vein Care (page 16).



**DO NOT FLUSH**



**DO NOT INJECT TABLETS**

**TIP:**

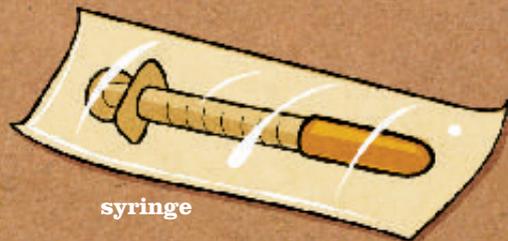
**More advice at the Safer Injecting Workshop. Ask MQI or your local needle exchange.**

# WORKS

Works means gear, spikes (needles), citric, water, barrels (syringes), spoons, filters, tourniquets, alcohol swabs and the surface used to cook up.

## Remember

- Viruses can live in any part of your works.
- Don't assume that if it looks clean it is clean.
- Single use syringes are the safest as water and/or bleach will not destroy all viruses.
- Mark your spoon and tourniquet so you don't confuse them with someone else's.
- Always use a fresh filter.
- Always dispose of your works safely.
- Return syringes, barrels and spikes and ask for a sharps bin (sin bin) when you are next in your local needle exchange.



syringe



citric



sterile water



metal spoon

**TIP:**

You do not have to see the blood for a virus to be present.

### WATER

- Use sterile water from the needle exchange. Each vial is for single use only.
- If you have no sterile water. Boil your own water and allow it to cool.
- Bottled water is not sterile (can be full of bacteria) and should not be used.

**Never use water from the toilet bowl. This is full of germs.**

### CITRIC

- Only use a small amount of citric. Using too much will irritate the injecting site and damage veins.
- Each citric sachet is for single use only.
- Generally the amount in the citric sachets is too much for one hit only use enough to break down the heroin.
- Do not use lemon juice or vinegar. This can cause infections and/or kidney damage.

**If it is not breaking down it probably is not heroin and you should not inject it.**

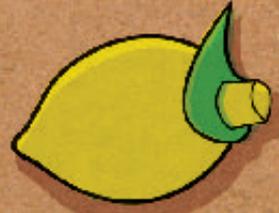
### VITAMIN C

- Vitamin C/Vit C (also known as ascorbic acid) can be used to break down heroin however there is no evidence that it is better than citric.
- The main difference is that you need to use more Vit C than Citric. Citric is a stronger acid.
- They can both cause vein damage.
- Vitamin C sachets are the best option. Use as little as possible.

**If you are using Vit C make sure it is Ascorbic Acid BP (pure vitamin C).**



**DO NOT USE BOTTLED WATER**



**DO NOT USE LEMON JUICE**



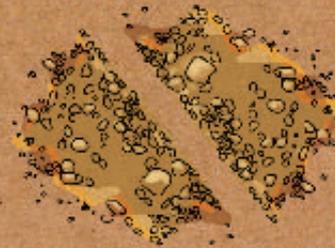
**DO NOT USE VINEGAR**

# SHARING DRUGS

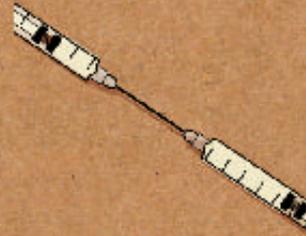
## front & backloading

### Remember

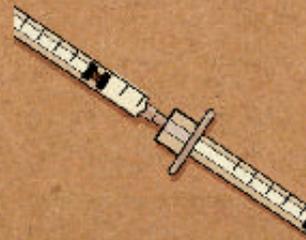
- These are two common ways of sharing drugs which should only be used if all equipment is known to have been previously unused.
- If anything that is used is not sterile everyone is at risk.
- This is unsafe practice as it's difficult to ensure that everything in the other person's works is sterile.
- This involves drawing up the whole drug solution, once prepared, into one syringe which has a needle attached.
- Then some of the solution is squirted back into the other syringe/s either through the front end where the needle is removed (frontloading) or through the back end where the plunger is removed (backloading).
- It is safer to only use your own works.



**DIVIDE UP  
BEFORE YOU  
COOK UP**



**FRONTLOADING**



**BACKLOADING**

**TIP:**

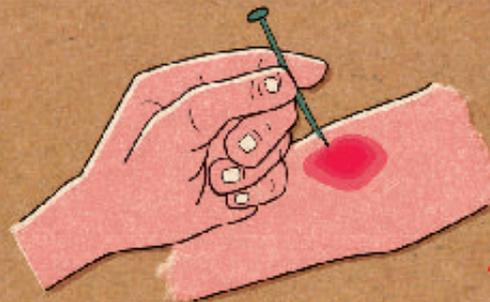
**Divide up before you cook up.**

# GET HELP IF...

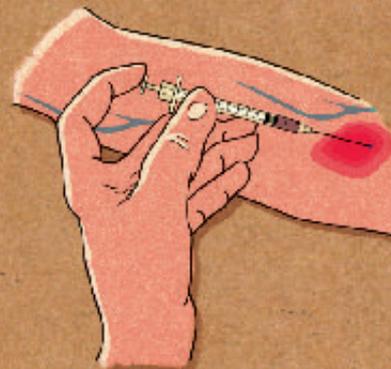
- You have cuts or wounds that need attention.
- The area around the injecting site is raised, red, hot and painful.
- You think you have an abscess. Remember do not cut it open as this can lead to blood poisoning.
- You have painful, heavy, swollen and/ or dead leg. It may be **DVT** (Deep Venous Thrombosis).
- You hit an artery and it wont stop bleeding.
- Your arm or leg is white, cold, or there is a loss of sensation. Go to your local Accident and Emergency department **immediately**.
- If you have been jabbed accidentally by a used needle go straight the local Accident & Emergency.

## Where Help is available

- The local **Accident & Emergency**
- Your local **GP**
- The local **Health Centre**
- **MQI's Primary Care Unit**



**DO NOT TRY  
TO LANCE  
AN ABSCESS  
YOURSELF**



**DO NOT INJECT  
NEAR AN  
INFECTED SITE  
OR LUMP**

**TIP:**

**If in doubt: Get it checked out**

# OVERDOSE

## To reduce risk of overdose...

- Try not to mix drugs; some drugs increase the strength (potency) of others.
- Look at alternatives to injecting e.g. smoking.
- If you have been clean for a while remember your tolerance will have dropped. Take a test dose to get feel for the strength before you inject the full amount.
- If you are using a new drug for the first time also take a test dose.
- Try not to inject alone.

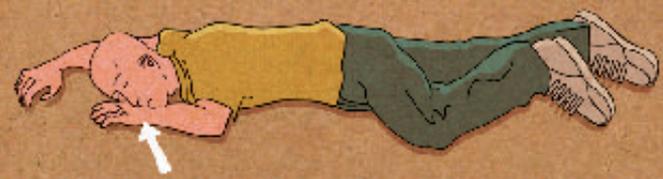
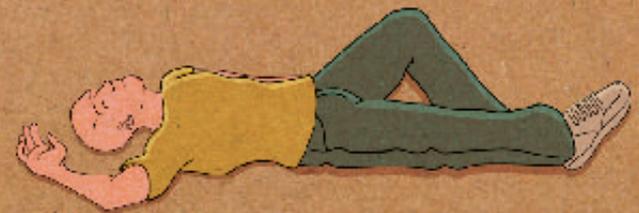
## Signs of an overdose...

Someone has overdosed if they are...

- Not responding to pain.
- Breathing very slowly or have stopped breathing.
- Starting to turn blue.
- Not coming around within three minutes.

## What to do...

- If someone overdoses, don't assume they'll come around. Call 999 immediately.
- Try not to panic.
- If they are breathing put them in the recovery position. This stops them from choking on vomit.
- If the person is not breathing, and you know CPR try to resuscitate them.
- Stay with the person until help arrives.



RECOVERY POSITION

**TIP:** Swallowed tablets take up to 4 hours to kick in. Remember this if you are using more than one drug.

# H.I.V and HEP B & C

## H.I.V

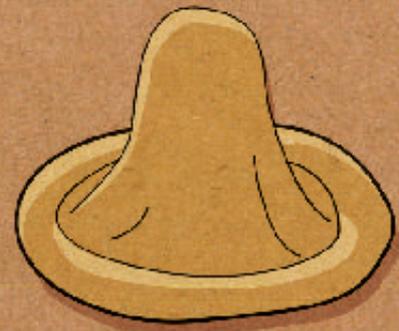
- This is a virus which is passed on through blood and body fluids.
- People can live a long life with HIV with medical support.

## HEP B and C

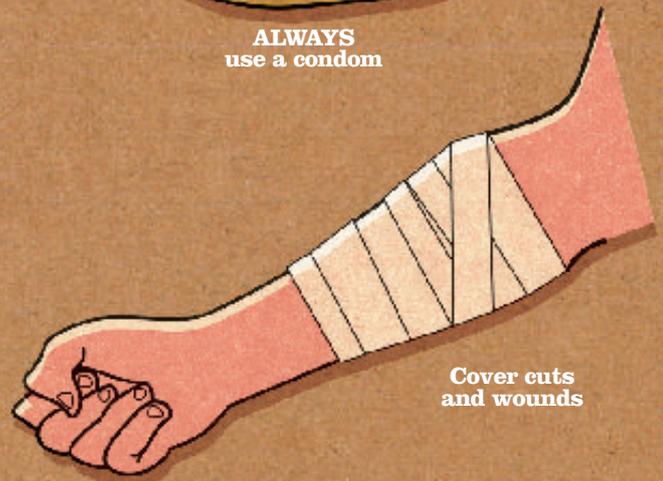
- Hep B and C are viruses that can live outside the body.
- Hepatitis B & C are much more easily passed on (infectious) than H.I.V.
- They are also passed on through blood and body fluids.

## Protect yourself...

- Know the facts. Information available on HIV, Hep B & C in **MQI** and your local health centre.
- Practice safer injecting techniques.
- Practice safer sex. Condoms are available free of charge from **MQI**.
- If you and your partner, both have HIV or Hep C, you can be passing different types (strains) to each other.
- Cover cuts and wounds.
- Get a Hep B vaccination in **MQI** or other Health Centres.
- Viruses can also live in snorting equipment e.g. tooters, straws etc.



**ALWAYS**  
use a condom



**Cover cuts**  
and wounds

**TIP:** Never share toothbrushes and razors as viruses can live here also.

# ALTERNATIVES TO INJECTING up the bum

## Why use it?

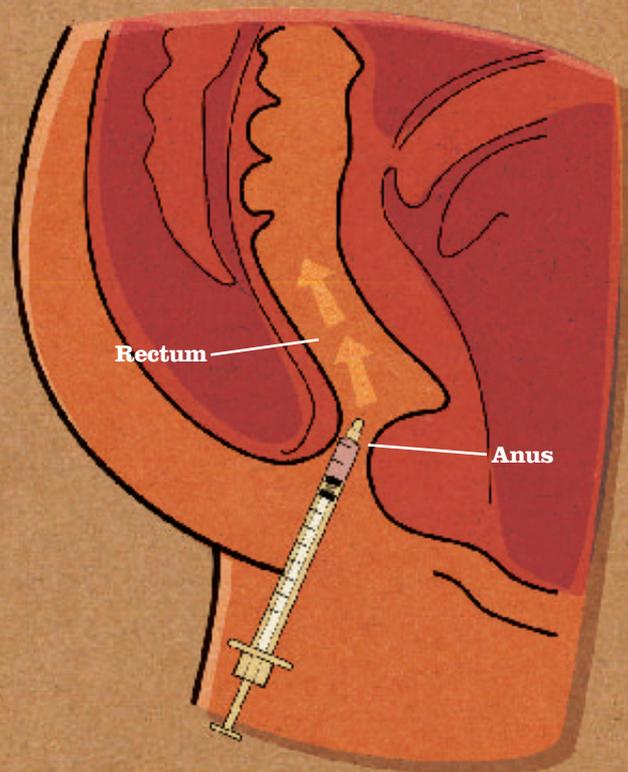
- Quick and easy.
- No needle used.
- Best hit without injecting. It takes 30 seconds to be absorbed into bloodstream.

## How...

- Prepare your hit – no more than 1.5mls in barrel.
- Remove the needle.
- Wipe spit or Vaseline around your bum to ease barrel in.
- Make a farting motion to relax muscles. Push barrel in one centimetre.
- This will make it come on faster. If you go any deeper it won't work as well.
- Sit, squat or stand and gently squirt liquid in.
- Bum muscles act as a double seal so it will not leak out.
- If your syringe is clogged or if it has clotted blood in it consider this method.

## Risks...

- Not advised when using cocaine as a lot of use may damage the inside of your bum.
- Do not use if you suffer from piles.
- You run the same risks of catching H.I.V., Hep B and C if you share any works or front or back load.



**TIP:**

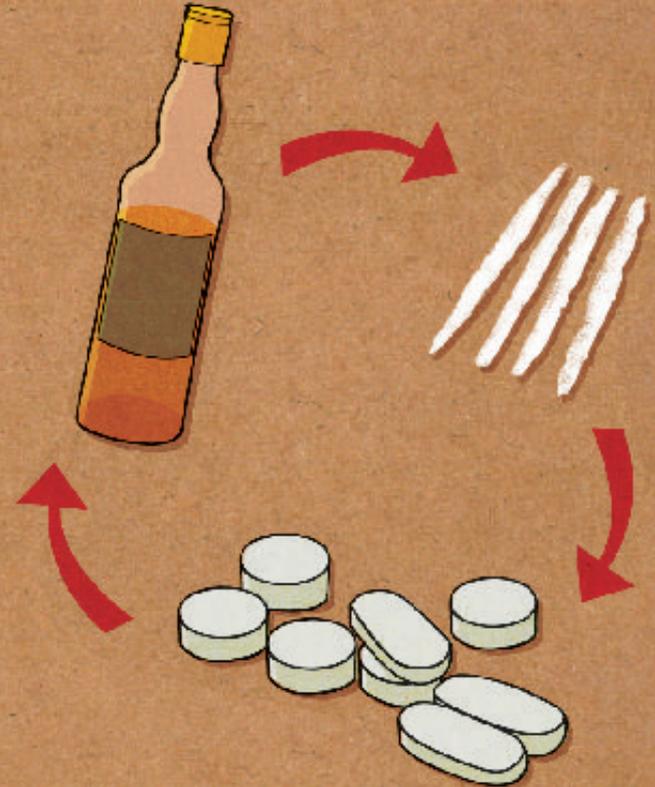
Consider other alternatives such as accessing drug treatment or smoking. Ask staff in MQI.

# POLY DRUG USE

Poly drug use is when you use more than one drug

## Risks

- Mixing pills, alcohol, methadone, and heroin can quickly lead to overdose.
- Some drugs are slower acting then others You can increase the risk of overdosing by taking too much at once without realising.
- Some drugs increase the strength (potency) of others.
- Using more then one drug can make it hard to make safe decisions about how much to take of each drug.
- Mixing alcohol and cocaine is particularly dangerous as it forms a third substance in your body called coca ethylene.
- Remember MQI services cater for users of all drugs.



### DID YOU KNOW?

Swallowed tablets take up to 4HRS to kick in.

### TIP:

Cocaine has an anaesthetic effect (local pain killer); after a small amount has been injected you may not feel the pain of poor injecting technique.

# FOR MORE INFO

## Contact

**Merchants Quay Ireland**  
Homeless & Drugs Services  
4 Merchants Quay  
Dublin 8

You can drop into us or phone  
**(01) 645 6524** or **(01) 645 6500**

### Needle Exchange Times

Mon, Wed, Thurs & Fri  
10am – 1pm and 2pm – 4.30pm

Tues 2pm – 4.30pm

### Safer Injecting Workshop

Wed 2-4pm

### Primary Health Care

Services include treatment for abscesses, ulcers, wounds, blood testing, vaccinations and referrals to hospitals and any health advice needed.

### Stabilisation, Settlement & Integration Services

Ask staff for more information.

**Merchants Quay Ireland (MQI)** also has residential drug treatment services.

### Banging Up Coke Booklet

A booklet on how to avoid accidental and indirect sharing available from **MQI** and your local needle exchange.

# we are here



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Homeless & Drugs Services  
4 Merchants Quay  
Dublin 8

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**or: (01) 645 6500**

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[www.mqi.ie](http://www.mqi.ie)

# SOURCES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## Credits

This book was compiled by **Lynda Haran** and **Niamh Randall** with **Pam Hosford** and **Eugene O'Leary**.

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## Acknowledgements

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**Andrew Preston** and **Jon Derricott** – Exchange Supplies UK.

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Preston, A & Derricott, J (2000) **The Safer injecting Handbook Second Edition**. Exchange Supplies.

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**Going into the Groin: Injecting in the Femoral Vein**. Lifeline Publications.

**Banging up Coke: A Booklet on How to Avoid Indirect and Accidental Sharing** (2007) Harm Reduction Steering Group.

**Getting Off Right: A Safety Manual for Injecting Drug Users**. Harm Reduction Coalition.

**Up Your Bum: An Alternative Guide to Injecting**. HIT.

## Useful websites for further information

[www.lifelinepublications.org.uk](http://www.lifelinepublications.org.uk)

[www.hit.org](http://www.hit.org)

[www.exchangesupplies.org](http://www.exchangesupplies.org)

[www.mqi.ie](http://www.mqi.ie)

## Design & Layout

[BRENb.net](http://BRENb.net)

### **Safer Injecting Booklet Disclaimer**

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