Drug Use

Drug abuse makes it easier to get HIV. When you use alcohol or drugs, you are more likely to have sex. You are also less likely to practice safer sex.

You might get or pass on HIV when you share needles for drugs like heroin or speed. It is also risky to trade sex for drugs.

If you use alcohol or drugs, it may take longer to know that you have HIV. Some of the symptoms of HIV look like the signs of drug and alcohol abuse. You should be very honest with your doctor if you use drugs or drink.

How Drug Use Affects HIV

More studies are needed to know if drug use makes HIV turn into AIDS faster. It is clear that people who abuse drugs may not to take care of themselves as well. They miss meals, do not get enough sleep and miss doses of their HIV drugs. This can make your body and immune system weaker. It puts you at risk for other illnesses.

People who use drugs may not follow HIV treatment well. Resistance is the word used when your HIV meds no longer work in your body. It happens when people miss doses. The virus in your body changes and the HIV drugs no longer work for you. This makes it very hard to control HIV. Whole groups of meds may not work anymore.

Health Problems from Drug Use and HIV

Many problems can come up if a person with HIV also uses drugs. These include:

- Bacterial pneumonia and tuberculosis (TB). These are a risk for all people with HIV. They are more likely when you also use drugs. Shared pipes can spread TB.
- Changes in how the body stores and uses food. These include problems with hormones, fats in the blood (lipids), starches and sugar. Drugs like cocaine shrink the blood vessels in your gut. This makes it harder to use the food you eat. It also makes it harder for your body to absorb HIV treatment.
- Crystal meth will also shrink the blood vessels in your mouth. This will damage your gums and you can lose your teeth.
- Anemia. This is when you lose red blood cells. Your red blood cells help move oxygen into your cells. Without oxygen you will be tired and less able to be active.
- Hepatitis C virus, if needles are used
- Heart problems from cocaine
- Damage to the brain and nerves from cocaine and meth
- Problems with your stomach and how you pass your food
- Wasting syndrome
- High viral load

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Drugs and HIV Treatment

Drugs taken at the same time may have effects that neither has by itself. When you mix HIV treatment and drugs, it can cause one drug to take over the effect of the other. It could also make one drug stronger than normal. This can be deadly.

Most HIV treatments are removed from your body by the liver. When your liver works to process these, it is hard for it to remove other drugs in your system.

The drugs below can mix with HIV treatments in harmful ways:

- Alcohol can raise levels of Ziagen® (abacavir) in the blood. Long-term drinking can lower how much HIV treatment gets into the blood stream. Alcohol taken with Videx® (didanosine or ddI) can increase the risk of a disease of the pancreas.
- Crystal meth (also called crank, glass, speed, Tina and other names) uses the same parts of the liver as HIV drugs. There is a lot of danger when you mix these. Using Norvir® (ritonavir) and meth at the same time can double or triple the amount of meth in your body.
- Ecstasy uses the same parts of the liver as HIV treatments. People who take both this drug and HIV meds may end up with very high levels of Ecstasy in the body. There is one proven case of a death due to a mixture of Ecstasy and Norvir® (ritonavir). When people taking Crixivan® (indinavir) also take Ecstasy, they have a higher risk of kidney stones. This is because they tend to not get enough water.
- Xyrem® (GHB) is released from the body by the lungs when you breathe. HIV drugs may increase levels of GHB in the body.
- Ketamine (also known as K or Special K) is processed by the liver. Some HIV drugs may cause ketamine to build up in the body.

Take Care of Yourself

- Limit your alcohol use.
- Stop illegal drug use.
- Talk to your doctor and care manager if you think you have a problem with alcohol or drug abuse. They can help you find resources.

For more information
Contact your Registered Nurse Care Manager, or call PHP Nurse Advice Line at (800) 797-1717.

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