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## Are there risks of getting HIV if I drink or use drugs?



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Yes! Alcohol or drugs won't infect you with HIV, but taking risks while you're drunk or high might.

When you drink or use drugs, you may not make the same decisions as you would when not under the influence. For example, you may not bother to use protection during sex. Having unprotected sex is a common way of getting HIV.

You may also take the risk of sharing a needle to inject drugs. About one quarter of all new HIV infections occur among people who inject drugs. This is due to the invisible amounts of blood that are in the needle or syringe (or other injection equipment such as cookers, water, cotton filters, straws and pipes). If you use the same needle as someone who is infected with HIV, you shoot her/his infected blood into your bloodstream.

Remember that poppers (nitrite inhalants) and Viagra® increase blood flow by dilating the blood vessels in the pelvic area, making the skin of the vagina and anus thinner and weaker, and therefore easier to tear. Tiny tears in these tissues make it easier for viruses to enter your bloodstream, increasing your risk for HIV infection.

### How can I protect myself if I choose to drink or inject drugs?

Reduce your risk of HIV infection:

- limit drinking or drug taking before sex—this way, you are more likely to take precautions.
- if you are going to be drinking or injecting drugs, bring latex or polyurethane condoms (or other protective barriers) and/or clean needles with you (condoms and needles can often be obtained for free from your local public health department)
- practice safer sex (see Question 11 “How can I have sex more safely?”)
- practice “safer needle use”—use a new needle and new supplies each time you inject drugs; don't share any injection drug equipment.

## **If I must re-use drug-injecting equipment, how do I reduce the risk of infection?**

You can reduce the risk of infection by cleaning your needle and syringe:

- Fill syringe with clean water, shake it for 30 seconds and empty it. Throw away the water.
- Fill syringe with bleach, shake it for 30 seconds and empty it. Repeat.
- Fill syringe with clean water again, shake it for 30 seconds and empty it. Throw away the water. Repeat.

Remember, needle cleaning with bleach may reduce your risk for HIV infection, but other viruses like hepatitis may not be killed by bleach. Do not re-use needles unless you have no other options.

***For more information, contact your local AIDS service organization or health care practitioner.***

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**For more copies of this fact sheet or other documents on HIV/AIDS, contact the**  
Canadian HIV/AIDS Clearinghouse, 400-1565 Carling Avenue, Ottawa, ON K1Z 8R1  
☎ 877-999-7740 ☎ 613-725-1205 ✉ [aidssida@cpha.ca](mailto:aidssida@cpha.ca) [www.clearinghouse.cpha.ca](http://www.clearinghouse.cpha.ca)  
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