



Northern Health Position on the Prevention of Problematic Substance Use

with a Focus on Alcohol

- Northern Health wants to increase health and wellness and improve quality of life for Northerners by promoting the prevention of problematic substance use. This will be achieved by working with individuals and community partners to promote the following messages:
- A shared understanding of problematic substance use.
- Inform the health system and educate the public about problematic substance use.
- A shared commitment to operate from a harm reduction philosophy in all aspects of policy; consider public health approach to regulation.
- A systems approach to the prevention of problematic substance use, including engagement with sectors beyond health (e.g., education, social services, policing).
- Provide and support clear messages that address safer substance use and reduced risk taking (e.g., for Northerners of legal drinking age who choose to drink alcohol, promote Canada's Low Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines).
- Prevent, delay and reduce substance use by at-risk populations.
- Problematic substance use data is gathered, assessed and reported to continue to monitor the impact in Northern BC.

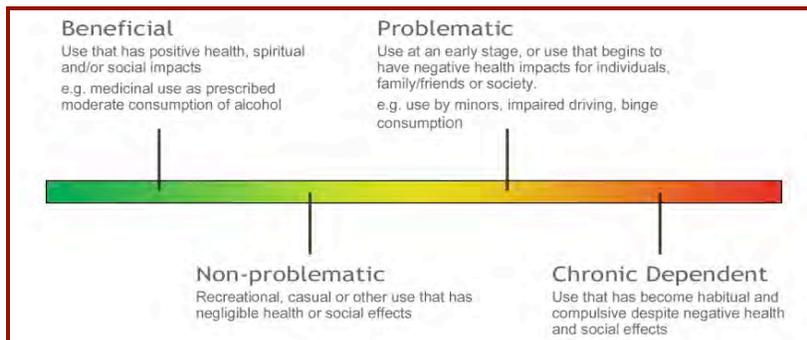
Understanding Problematic Substance Use

Psychoactive substances are those plants, chemicals or preparations which can be taken to alter a person's mood or consciousness (e.g., tobacco, alcohol, medications and illegal drugs (e.g., cannabis, cocaine)). The substance impacts the brain and, subsequently, behaviour. Instances or patterns of substance use occur along a spectrum of use, which ranges from beneficial and non-problematic to problematic or dependent uses (Figure 1).

For further information, please refer to the complete Northern Health ***Position Statement on the Prevention of Problematic Substance Use*** available on the Northern Health website: www.northernhealth.ca (About Us / Position Statements Addressing Risk Factors), or by using the following address:
<http://northernhealth.ca/AboutUs/PositionStatements.aspx>

Problematic use refers to use that negatively impacts individuals, families/friends or the community, such as: intoxication, injury, risky behaviours, acute & chronic illness, justice system burden, violence, crime, absenteeism, unemployment and criminal activity.

Figure 1: Spectrum of Use



Source: Government of British Columbia, Ministry of Health Services and Ministry of Children and Family Development (2010).

What Substances are of Concern?

	BC's Burden of Disease	Canada's Economic Burden of Problematic Substance Use
Tobacco	12%	43%
Alcohol	10%	37%
Illegal substances	2%	21%

Tobacco use is addressed in a separate Northern Health position paper. Due to the proportion of the burden of disease and data availability, this paper has an alcohol focus. It is intended that, where appropriate, the principles in preventing problematic use of alcohol are transferable to preventing the problematic use of other psychoactive substances.

Alcohol:

- The primary contributor to substance-related injuries in BC and Northern Health.
- Causes more hospitalization than all major illicit drugs combined.
- Causes more deaths than all major illicit drugs combined.

Harm Reduction

Harm reduction refers to policies, programs and practices that seek to reduce the adverse health, social and economic consequences of the use of legal and illegal psychoactive substances.

Harm reduction does not require, nor does it exclude, abstinence as an ultimate goal.

Harm reduction focuses on keeping people safe and minimizing death, disease and injury associated with higher risk behaviour, while recognizing that the behaviour may continue despite the risks. This is an essential part of a comprehensive response to problematic substance use that complements prevention, treatment and enforcement.

Stigma and Discrimination

In those with substance use disorders, stigma contributes to adverse outcomes. Adverse outcomes may include: the development of poor mental or physical health; not seeking, entering or completing treatment; delayed recovery and reintegration and increased risky behaviour (e.g., needle sharing). Stigma contributes to negative impacts in various domains of life/health determinants (e.g., education, employment, income, housing, social connections).

Strategies for Prevention

Preventing problematic substance use exists along a continuum - from health promotion to tertiary prevention and harm reduction. Preventing problems before they begin is the most effective way to ensure positive health outcomes for individuals and communities. Primary prevention seeks to prevent the onset of problems and this is the focus of this paper and includes universal and selected prevention. The prevention of problematic substance use is currently being considered by various organizations within and outside of Canada. For example:

- Development of [Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines](#); a tool to reduce the risk of alcohol-related harms to Canadians.
- The [Health Officer's Council of British Columbia](#) recommends that a public health oriented approach is needed to regulate all psychoactive substances. The goal is to balance the benefit to harm ratio: that the associated control interventions are proportionate to the harms from the substance use.