

# Psychoactive Substance Use Policy Backgrounder

Alberta Health Services (AHS) is committed to supporting people impacted by psychoactive substance use through improving access to a comprehensive continuum of services with a recovery-oriented approach. This approach is inclusive of prevention, harm reduction, addiction treatment and supports for recovery, and places priority on treating people impacted by substance use with respect, dignity and compassion.

This commitment is strengthened through the revised Psychoactive Substance Use policy, which was formerly known as Harm Reduction for Psychoactive Substance Use Policy. This policy provides clearer direction on program planning and practices that enhance strategies to support people to achieve a meaningful, fulfilling life, whatever this may look like for them.

The Psychoactive Substance Use Policy has been implemented within all service areas of AHS. All employees of AHS, including medical and midwifery staff, students, volunteers, and other persons acting on behalf of AHS are expected to support patients using substances and their families with accessible, equitable, non-judgmental, compassionate, and evidence-based care that promotes a comprehensive, recovery-oriented approach that is respectful of individual rights and dignity.

## What is the recovery-oriented approach?

The recovery-oriented approach is an approach to empower people experiencing substance use and mental health issues to use their strengths and skills to live the life they choose. Recovery is self-defined and looks different from one person to the next. Recovery may not necessarily mean abstaining from substance use. Recovery is achievable through different pathways and people can choose the path that makes sense to them on their journey.

The recovery-oriented approach is inclusive of numerous interventions such as prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and supports for recovery. Within this approach, health care providers shall respect patient choice and goals, and take steps to identify and build upon their strengths and skills.

## What is harm reduction?

Harm reduction is defined as policies, programs and practices that aim primarily to reduce the adverse health, social or economic consequences of the use of legal and illegal psychoactive substances without necessarily reducing consumption. A harm reduction approach to substance use accepts that abstinence may or may not be a realistic or desirable goal for an individual patient, and explicitly acknowledges that the cessation of substance use is not a prerequisite for accessing health or social services. Interventions may be targeted at the individual, the family, community or society.

Harm reduction involves reducing harms from stigma and systemic barriers as well. The initial priority is to decrease the harms associated with psychoactive substance use and promote wellness, which can support recovery in the long term.

### **Working with people impacted by psychoactive substance use**

The following principles from the Psychoactive Substance Use Policy provide a foundation for working with patients and families impacted by psychoactive substance use:

- Recognize that psychoactive substance use is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that is on a spectrum from beneficial to harmful.
- Patients who use psychoactive substances have the right to receive equitable, non-judgmental, and evidence-based health care services.
- Abstinence or a reduction in substance use is not required to receive health care services. The initial priority is to decrease harms associated with psychoactive substance use and promote wellness, which can support recovery in the long term.
- Recovery is achievable and can look different for each person. Patients/families can choose the path that makes sense to them on their journey to recovery.
- Patients are informed of evidence-based treatments, prevention, health promotion, culturally-safe, recovery-focused, and community based options available to them.
- Low-threshold, flexible, and accessible patient-centred services are provided, whenever possible.
- The impact of social determinants of health on lives, health status and psychoactive substance use is recognized and inequities are addressed to promote optimum health for the patient.
- Patients are treated with respect and dignity without judgement, stigma or discrimination.
- Individuals with lived experience have expertise to contribute and are included as partners in the creation of programs, policies and strategies.

### **Implementing the policy across the continuum of care**

Implementation of the Psychoactive Substance Use Policy will emphasize the importance healthcare providers proactively listening to, honoring, and respecting the patient's and family's values, preferences, and cultural practices. Examples of implementation may include:

- Programs and services supporting health care providers to identify and address potential and/or actual harms related to psychoactive substance use as a part of regular practice and exploring opportunities to promote health, wellness, recovery, and prevent harm whenever appropriate.
- Continuing to support patient-centred approaches to care and adhering to principles of health promotion.
- Promoting holistic health by partnering with other programs that address the social determinants of health (e.g., access to mental health services, basic needs, counselling, withdrawal management, addiction treatment services, public health, primary health care, cultural/spiritual care, reproductive health).

- Supporting patients to make informed choices and decisions about their clinical care, treatment, recovery, and other services that may impact their health outcomes.
- Programs, services and health care providers across the care continuum providing low threshold access to treatment and/or referrals for patients (e.g., addiction treatment) while also maintaining timely access to harm reduction services and supplies (e.g., naloxone kits, sterile injection supplies).
- Programs and services establishing processes for referral and follow-up with community services for patients to address their immediate and long-term needs.
- Health care providers working with Indigenous people who have lived experience with substance use alongside experts in the field of Indigenous health to promote practices that are grounded in cultural safety. This may include identifying alternatives to and/or supports for addiction treatment as recommended by Indigenous people.

### Support for Policy Implementation

AHS staff will be supported through educational initiatives and resources.

- To learn more about harm reduction and AHS programs and services for substance use and substance use disorders, visit [www.ahs.ca/harmreduction](http://www.ahs.ca/harmreduction)
- To learn more about AHS Addiction & Mental Health, visit [www.ahs.ca/amh](http://www.ahs.ca/amh)

For more information on the implementation of this policy, or if you have any questions or concerns, please email [harm.reduction@ahs.ca](mailto:harm.reduction@ahs.ca).

### Recommended Resources

- [AHS Psychoactive Substance Use Policy](#)
- [AHS Psychoactive Substance Use Policy Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQ\)](#)