

04

**Harm reduction
in chemsex
involvement / use**

Harm reduction practices can be applied before, during or after chemsex. Following a recent review, we sort the guidelines here into those three categories. It is important to note that harm reduction should not only tackle issues that directly have to do with substance use itself. The overall quality of life that the person(s) involved in chemsex enjoy(s) also needs to be considered here. Lastly, we address consent in the context of chemsex, an area exceptionally important but not always openly discussed.

4.1. MANAGING RISKS OF CHEMSEX INVOLVEMENT

4.1.1 BEFORE

SELF-CARE

IT IS IMPORTANT
TO REFLECT
ON OUR LIFE AS
LGBTQI+ INDIVIDUALS

Having a fulfilling life where pleasure and gratification do not exclusively come from substance use and casual sex can help protect us from some potential harm. Investing more time on being creative in our own unique ways, having a fulfilling network of people with mutual care and affection are some good ways to achieve this. Having a fulfilling life is definitely not in our hands only, especially when we belong to discriminated groups of people having faced adverse events in our lives, dealing with homonormativity, or during times of societal crisis. Even in such occasions, connection is a remedy; connection with other people, communities, social actions and our own selves, our needs and desires. As Fawcett²¹ describes, the journey to self-healing may be burdensome sometimes, but it leads to personal growth and a life worth living.

A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE
IS PROTECTIVE

Nutritious nourishment and exercise strengthen our body and organism and thus reduce some harms that come from chemsex (e.g. exhaustion, lack of food and/or drink etc.).

USING DATING APPS

Dating apps may provide easy and sometimes immediate access to pleasure, but they can also be quite addictive. They sometimes function as slot machines. They make us believe that, if only we spend some more time on them or view some new profiles, it will provide us with the 'jackpot' partner. This rarely happens. More often, we end up spending too much time scrolling, far more than we intended to, without any gratification. This leaves us frustrated and we miss out on potentially more fulfilling opportunities. Combining substances with app use may intensify this course or even make us take too much substance while we are looking for sexual partners. Additionally, it is important to be respectful and kind with each other in these contexts; discrimination and stigma are important factors of problematic chemsex involvement. Purchasing substances through dating apps can be risky. It is a good idea to find ways to have the substance(s) tested.

²¹Fawcett, D. (2015). *Lust, Men, and Meth: A Gay Man's Guide to Sex and Recovery*. Wilton Manors, FL: Healing Path Press.

TAKING OUR TIME AND CHECKING THINGS OUT

It is important to consider the safety of chemsex involvement before engaging in it and while still being sober. The venue (private house, sauna, cruising place) must be trusted and feel safe. Peers, internet forums etc. can offer information. If hooking up, it is important to trust the person/people we are meeting or get acquainted with them enough to feel safe (i.e. take some time!). It is important to go to chemsex parties with friends or trusted partners so that each will take care of the others. If we are going alone to any unknown venue and are unsure about its safety, we can inform a couple of trusted people of this (even give addresses or use location sharing) and maybe inform them when we get there (or leave).

PLANNING AHEAD

In order to keep control, it is useful to plan when sober what we want to use and for how long, what kind of sex we want to have, what boundaries we want to set regarding sex and substance use.

USING IN ORDER TO FEEL BETTER, NOT LESS BAD

In order to protect ourselves, it is a good idea to use substances when we are well to be even better. Using substances to overcome difficulties makes it more possible to become dependent on them or face their harmful side effects, given that their effects depend a lot on our mood when we use them. In the same manner, if we are dealing with mental health issues, we should be very careful in substance use, as that may exacerbate our symptoms. It is important to receive the proper mental health care by well-trained professionals or other means, such as peer-support groups, rather than to self-medicate.

CHECKING ON MEDICATION

If we are taking any kind of medication, we should honestly discuss our intention to use substances or our participation in chemsex with a trusted and non-judgemental healthcare professional, in order to be informed about potential harmful interactions. If we do not feel safe to discuss such issues with the doctor we are being treated by, we should find someone who will give us that safe space. Community services or other peers from our community may propose such referrals. There are also online sources (e.g. the HIV drug interactions website by University of Liverpool: <https://www.hiv-druginteractions.org/>) where we can check for potential interactions between medications and substances.

CHEMSEX AND SEX WORK

If we do sex work, there are several aspects we need to consider if we are involved in chemsex during our work. It is useful to have clear boundaries that are also clearly communicated to our clients in advance. It is also a good idea to make sure we get paid before chemsex involvement and stick to the predetermined time duration of our services. Community groups and services, as well as the internet, can help us get informed regarding harm reduction specific to sex work. Rekart et al. ²² have also published a useful review on harm reduction when doing sex work.

SEXUAL HEALTH

HIV MEDICATION

Some antiretrovirals, are found to prohibit the metabolism of the psychoactive substances in the liver and consequently make an overdose more likely. These include cobicistat (Tybost) and ritonavir (Norvir), used in several combination pills, as well as the protease inhibitor atazanavir (Reyataz), the non-nucleotide reverse transcriptase inhibitors nevirapine (Viramune), and efavirenz (Stocrin/ Sustiva), which can also be part of combination pills (e.g. Atripla), We should be particularly careful if we are taking these medications. Consulting with our HIV specialist is important to be sure that we minimise any harmful interaction between antiretroviral medication and chems.

GETTING TESTED

It is important to get tested for sexually transmitted infections regularly in order to be treated, but also not to transmit any of them to our partners by accident. If we regularly engage in chemsex activities, being tested every three months is a good idea. Community testing centres and sexual health clinics are often friendly and safe for LGBTQI+ people.

LUBES AND CONDOMS

It is also useful to purchase or be provided with lubes and condoms before engaging in chemsex, to prevent sexually transmitted infections transmissions.

LEARN ABOUT PREP AND PEP

We can get informed about Pre-Exposure-Prophylaxis (PrEP) and decide whether we would like to use it in order to be protected from HIV transmission in case we do not use a condom (bare backing). If we are using PrEP, it is useful to consult with a sexual health specialist in order to get tested with the proper frequency to check for other STIs as PrEP only protects from HIV, and to check for very rare but possible side effects from PrEP use.

GETTING VACCINATED FOR VIRAL HEPATITIS A AND B (HAV/HBV), AND THE HUMAN PAPILOMAVIRUS (HPV)

Vaccination for HAV, HBV and HVP, as well as meningitis and MPOX in some countries, is recommended for GBMSM, as they protect our health from infections quite probable in the course of sexual activities. This is even truer in cases where multiple partners are very likely, such as in the context of chemsex. Additionally, they protect our partners.

CONSIDER USING PEP OR PREP FOR STIS

There is some evidence regarding the use of azithromycin and doxycycline antibiotics as PEP or PrEP for bacterial infections (such as syphilis, chlamydia or gonorrhoea). However, they are not yet well documented and there are concerns for the potential development of antimicrobial resistance due to their casual use.



SUBSTANCE USE

LEARNING ABOUT HARM REDUCTION

We can learn about harm reduction regarding the substances we are going to use through various sources (e.g. internet, leaflets, and trusted people) and community services (e.g. sexual health clinics). This way, we will be ready to deal with any problems that might turn up.

TAKING CARE OF OUR EQUIPMENT

As clean equipment is extremely important to prevent infection transmission, we should prepare and check everything we are going to use (straws, pipes, sterile needles etc.). We can either buy that equipment or, in some cases, get it from relevant services. When slamming in particular, it is important to make sure to be equipped with enough sterile needles, syringes and other equipment used for the injection.

CARING FOR EACH OTHER

TALKING TO EACH OTHER

Discussing personal habits, substance use and sexual preferences as well as related boundaries with potential partners before engaging in partying and playing is important to avoid unpleasant or even bad experiences. Sometimes, it feels awkward to discuss such matters, especially in cases of hook-ups, but it helps to take care of each other, overcome inhibitions and may even become part of the foreplay and fun if discussed in a playful, respectful and kind context. As a matter of fact, if the aim of chemsex is for everyone to have pleasure and fun, those discussions are in everyone's best interest.

PERSONAL HYGIENE

It is a good idea to keep our nails short, especially if we are interested in fisting. Similarly, we should remove rings, bracelets and watches in advance.

4.1.2. DURING

SELF CARE

STICKING TO THE PLAN

Using a logbook (e.g. in a mobile phone or in written form) may be useful to keep track of the amount of substance we have used and when we could take more safely. In case any problems occur (such as an overdose), there will be information on the substances taken. Additionally, keeping the time limits set for chemsex involvement will help to avoid being exhausted or missing important activities the following day or days. Missing work due to chemsex may cost us our job. Furthermore, missing other important responsibilities and activities may cause shame and frustration and these emotions may lead to self-medicating through chems. This can create a vicious cycle, ruining the experience and probably leading to problematic use. Of course, in case something unexpected and exciting happens during an encounter, it may be deemed worthwhile to depart from the plans. It is preferable to make a conscious choice of such a departure where logging your activities and plans can be a supportive mechanism.

LOOKING AFTER PERSONAL ITEMS

In case we are visiting an unknown venue, a common place, such as a sauna, or are outdoors or among people we do not know, it is useful to have our personal items somewhere safe. Moreover, it might be a good idea to avoid carrying large amounts of money (this may also protect from buying more drugs when high than what was decided when sober and lose more money than we intended or even suffer an overdose) and other valuable equipment. Small pouches or keeping money and credit cards in socks we are wearing is helpful for this purpose.

TAKE A BREAK

Taking breaks is important, especially when being involved in chemsex over longer periods and sex parties as exhaustion is an important cause of harmful effects, including psychosis. During these breaks, having nutritious snacks will help to protect the stomach and give us energy. Hydrating (but not drinking more than three glasses of water or other liquid per hour) with non-alcoholic and probably caffeine-free beverages and having a shower will also protect and cool the body and keep it clean. Lube or other substance residue on the body may carry tiny amounts of blood. Similarly, washing and disinfecting hands between partners is important for everyone concerned. Cooling down a little may help us re-enter the party refreshed but also gives the opportunity to have a chat, discuss and get connected with interesting people. Chemsex has a lot to do with connection and connection is more than just sex.

SEXUAL HEALTH

CONDOMS AND LUBE

Condoms can protect both us and others from some sexually transmitted infections. Lubricants help to avoid injuries, including open wounds and bleeding, which would make infections more likely. They can also increase sexual pleasure. It is better not to share lubricants and not to rely on saliva as it dries rather quickly and chems actually decrease saliva production.

TAKING CARE OF OUR TOYS

It is generally a good idea to use our own sex toys or disinfect them before use. Toys, dildos and rectal douches that are made of silicone are easily disinfected by immersing them in a mixture of one part bleach and nine parts water for at least 5 minutes and rinse afterwards. Any grease from their surfaces should be removed before disinfection.

SUBSTANCE USE

LOOKING AFTER OUR EQUIPMENT

Clean equipment for drug use is of paramount importance, in order to be protected from injuries and infections.

- **Straws** for snorting should be clean and get changed often
- **Snorting** with banknotes is a bad idea. They are quite dirty and snorting may even cause some small bleeding that is difficult to notice but makes us vulnerable to bacterial infection.
- **Glass pipes** should also be intact and temperature tested. Cracks and pipes that are too hot may injure our lips and make us vulnerable to blood-borne infections. Some people find it useful to use mouthpieces made of heat-proof materials.
- **Injection** entails quite a few risks and possible harms. As such, it is covered in detail in the following section.

SLAMMING / INJECTING CHEMS

Although the very strong and rapid highs it provides can make it tempting / attractive, the dangers it entails (dependence, overdose, skin and blood infections etc.) can be very harmful. However, in case of slamming, one should consider the following:

- In order to avoid infection, injection equipment needs to be sterile and only used once. Additionally, it is important to thoroughly clean hands and to disinfect the area with disinfecting tissues that is about to be pierced, in order to avoid infection.
- Slamming in the veins should be done very carefully in order to minimise injuries. It is very important not to slam in an artery. Arteries are deeper than the veins and, if they are injected into, there will be a lot of blood and pain. In case of an accident, the needle should be removed immediately, put pressure on the wound with sterile equipment and urgently get medical care if the bleeding does not stop within 5 minutes.

- Using the same needle many times may reduce the sharpness of the needle and thus can easily injure the veins and cause a number of problems in blood flow, heart function and skin health.
- If a vein to inject is not immediately found and one wants to try again, they should use new sterile equipment and not inject into the same site.
- Slamming into the hands should be avoided, as those veins are quite fragile.
- Areas under the waistline should also be avoided, as regular slamming into this area may cause severe blood circulation problems.
- Injecting in areas that are swollen, wounded or hurt should be avoided.
- If using water to dilute substances, it should be boiled and let cool down before use.
- Used injection equipment should be kept safely, e.g. using an empty bottle with a cap, before disposing them.
- If an injected area is swollen, hurt, exhibits skin damage or change of colour that does not recede, a physician should be consulted!

NOT SHARING IS CARING

Sharing equipment carries high risk for the transmission of sexual and blood borne infections. It is useful to have different colour bands and nametags in order to tell our own substance use equipment apart.

DON'T MIX SUBSTANCES

Combining substances can be dangerous and may have unpredictable effects, probably even more than could be covered in the previous chapter. It is better to choose which substance we prefer and only use that substance during a single session. Using substances with which we are not familiar also carries risks, especially if we are in a relatively unknown venue with people we do not know. It will cause stress and we are more likely to have unwanted psychoactive effects. So, when we want to try a new substance, it is better to be sure that we have been informed to the point that we feel safe to use it. Additionally, in a chemsex party, in the peak of the high and the excitement, it is possible to confuse substances, e.g. powdered ones. It is important to be able to tell them apart easily and use the one we actually intend to.

ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION MEDICATION

Many people use erectile dysfunction medication during chemsex to feel confident, maintain lasting erections during prolonged sexual intercourse or tackle the erectile dysfunction effects that many chems (especially stimulants) cause. However, frequent use may cause dependence or interact harmfully with other substances. It is better to take smaller doses over longer time intervals, according to the indications on each erectile dysfunction drug. Taking a break from chems and porn may help to ameliorate dependence and its harmful effects. Otherwise, consulting a sex positive health professional could be helpful.

DRIVING

When on chems, as with alcohol, we should avoid driving. Psychostimulants may give the impression that they sharpen our senses and make us more efficient drivers. However, they could also impact our judgement, which is important when driving, which will make driving risky both for us and others.

CARING FOR EACH OTHER

Taking care of each other is of paramount importance and necessary in order for all participants to have fun! Playing with trusted partners is safer but also increases the pleasure and the exploration of sexual practices.

GOING WITH FRIENDS

It is preferable to join chemsex parties with trusted friends. In the course of the activities or during breaks, we may want to check on each other to make sure everyone is well and having fun. In case things get out of hand or unpleasant side effects manifest, we should invest as much time as necessary in taking care of each other. For some people it is useful to decide that one among a company of friends is going to keep tighter control over their use so that they keep an eye on the others, similar to when going out for drinks, the one who is driving doesn't have (too much) alcohol.

SHARING SUBSTANCES

If we are offering a substance to a partner, it is important to inform them on its effects and its probable side effects and not pressure them to use it, if they are not feeling sure.

SAFE WORDS

We may want to consider setting a safe word, as BDSM practice does. The safe word will be agreed upon by everyone in advance. If anyone says it, then whatever is happening must stop and that person must be looked after.

KINDNESS IS SEXY

Good sex, including very hard good sex, in any way each one of us defines it, requires trust. Being caring, kind and respectful, and looking after those who might need help, is sexy.





MAKING THE VENUE SAFE

In chemsex parties or when hosting one:

- It is useful to provide condoms, disposable gloves, clean towels, disinfectant wipes or sprays, plastic sheets, and paper towels.
- A quiet chillout room or corner is useful for us to take breaks.
- We should remove grease and oil from surfaces (sex slings, toys, furniture etc.) and then disinfect them before changing partners or sexual role or position.
- We should keep snacks and water handy and in sight, in order for the participants to be reminded to stay hydrated.
- Also, when hosting a chemsex party, it is useful to make sure that valuables are out of sight and locked. Maybe a room will be off party limits.

IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG

In cases of emergency, for example if somebody passes out, is disoriented or confused or acting weird, in terror or great anxiety, we need to take care of them!

- It is best to move them to a quiet place with no strong stimuli, such as music or lights.
- We should speak to them in a calm and reassuring tone or put them in a recovery position and stay with them (it is very useful for them to see familiar faces when waking up).
- In case of psychosis, we should not try to persuade somebody that they are hallucinating or delusional, especially if they do not ask us to do so. It is better to reassure them that they are safe, reflect their feelings and prioritise how they will feel emotionally better in the here and now.
- It is better not to assume the severity of one's condition, especially when they are unconscious.
- If they are unconscious, we should call the ambulance and be honest about the substances they have used. The medical and para-medical staff in most countries are not obliged to call the police, even if there is clear use of illegal substances. The medical and paramedical staff will only call the police in case they confirm that someone has died. In either case, acting decisively may save someone's life.

4.1.3 AFTER SELF-CARE

NOURISHMENT

Relaxation, quality food and drinks and proper sleep during the comedown period can help. Amino acids and other nutrition supplements (vitamins and minerals) can also help with the comedown (either through high quality protein or food supplements).

GIVING OURSELF TIME

It is useful to end the session early enough to have enough time to overcome the comedown. Skipping work or other activities will not help recovery and, in fact, may be harmful to us in other ways.

BEING KIND TO OURSELF

If things went wrong during chemsex involvement, we did things that we may regret, lost control, had a bad trip etc., it is very possible to feel shame, self-blame and guilt. These emotions can make the comedown more difficult. We should not react to mistakes in judgement, things going wrong, sexual explorations that went astray with accusations, self-blame and punishment, but rather with kindness and reflection, to ourselves first and foremost. Chemsex involvement may be some means for some of us to overcome or process 'queer trauma'²³, the subjective way an LGBTQI+ person has grown up and dealt with a world inhospitable to our sexuality. An integral part of queer trauma is shame for what each person is. Guilt tripping, though, actually feeds and re-activates this trauma, rather than treating it the way that serves us. An excellent set of essential tools regarding recovery are available²⁴.

HOW DID THE PLAN GO?

It may be useful to think about the substance use plan that we made before partying and playing. If it did not work well, we may need to reconsider it. If it was not kept, what were the reasons? Was the entire session fun? If not, when did that change? Did something trigger a craving to use, or to use more than we intended to? Those triggers will not necessarily be something very profound, or obvious. They can include a sexually arousing stimulus, for example, or a sudden intense emotion. It is useful to think about these triggers and their role in our departure from the plan or the inability not to use when we desire so.

IS ADDITIONAL HELP NEEDED?

If we realise that duration, amount of substance we took or the practices we were involved in were not the ones planned and we feel remorse about that, especially if this happens frequently, it might indicate a certain level of loss of control. These could be signs that we might be dipping into the problematic chemsex journey, becoming dependent, developing higher tolerance or facing other issues. In such cases, getting help is very important. This help may come from peers, friends, community services or properly trained LGBTQI+ affirmative professionals. It is a good idea to view issues coming up as opportunities for self-care, growth and to connection in a new, more fulfilling way.

²³Poulios, A. (2022). *Chemsex: Reintroducing Sexuality in the Pleasure and Pain of the Infans*. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 23(3), 171-183.

²⁴Fawcett, D. (2015). *Lust, Men, and Meth: A Gay Man's Guide to Sex and Recovery*. Wilton Manors, FL: Healing Path Press.

SEXUAL HEALTH

PEP

It is important to consider PEP as soon as the session is over, if other protective means were either not used or failed to provide protection. Sometimes, antibiotic PEP is proposed for bacterial infections but there is not yet enough evidence in the area. For these matters, consulting a specialist physician can be helpful.

GETTING TESTED

In any case, it is very important to be informed about the window periods of each sexually transmitted infection test and get tested as soon as the tests will provide valid results.

CARING FOR EACH OTHER

After the session, it may also be a good idea to stay in touch with partners that were not hook-ups only. Discussing what we liked, what can be improved, what may have gone wrong or needs that may arise during difficult comedowns may provide some much-needed care and an opportunity to blow off some steam.

During comedown, while we are reflecting on the last session's events, consent issues may arise. Consent is a very sensitive matter that should be taken seriously. For this reason, we shall discuss it in the next chapter.



4.2 CONSENT

The patriarchy and toxic masculinity in which we have been brought up often makes sexual abuse a taboo topic for people who identify as men and masculinities²⁵ in general. This makes us even more vulnerable to its effects. These effects are often handled in maladaptive ways.

4.2.1 WHAT IS SEXUAL CONSENT?



Consent is an informed, voluntary and conscious yes to the proposal of another person and includes the right to revoke that yes at any time. Simple as that might sound, it can get complicated when various factors limit a person's ability to say no.

Sexual pleasure is about fun, exploration and, often, a search for transcendence. However, we may not always know in advance what we will find on the way or at the end of this search, or how the experience will affect us. For queer people in particular, sex can be a field where we try to rupture the mould that has been imposed on us or the roles we are performing in our day-to-day lives. In some cases, we may even consent to not consenting, in a way. Such cases include harder sex or BDSM practices, where we can let ourselves surrender to an experience, exactly because we do not know where it will take us. That can be a transcendental experience, but it can also result in unforeseen and undesired events.

4.2.2 CONSENT AND CHEMSEX

As we have discussed above, when people participate in chemsex, a transcendental experience is often the goal. However, the effects of the different substances used, combined with this goal, can blur the lines of consent.

We may consent in advance to taking psychoactive substances for recreational purposes, such as sex, but these substances might later affect our judgement. So, the decisions we make later, under their influence, may not be the same as the ones we would have made sober, which may, in turn, make them less valid. It is not so rare that, in the heat of the moment or a substance high, someone might not understand if they are being given consent to do something. They may even not be able to change their behaviour if they realise that consent is not given, or even not possible. So, they might end up violating someone, which they would never do when sober.

On the other hand, under the influence of chems, a person might not always be able to clearly express a no. If someone has sex with us while we were not fully able to consciously say no that is rape.

It is not rare for someone to only realise later, during the comedown, when the substances' effects have faded, that they consented to things that they would not have agreed to if they had been sober, or that they have acted in ways that they would not have done had they been sober. In fact, this realisation can come several days later, after the comedown is over.

The effects of such instances can be very painful or even traumatic. Not only can they ruin the experience itself, but they might also have other, very serious consequences, which can affect the overall wellbeing of those involved for a long time.

²⁵We use here the word 'masculinities' in plural for two reasons. Firstly, it includes people who, while having some traits traditionally associated with men in their gender identity and/or expression, do not neatly fall into the gender binary. Secondly, the word 'masculinities' reaffirms that there are many ways to be a man and/or masculine beyond the confines of hegemonic masculinity that society insists on imposing.

4.2.3 CONSENT AND HARM REDUCTION

BEFORE

As we have also noted in the substance use section, making conscious decisions regarding boundaries and limits before partying and playing is useful. These need to be communicated with partners before any sexual activity takes place.

Much like with BDSM, our possible involvement in chemsex requires knowing the possible risks it might include and educating ourselves on harm reduction techniques and practices.

DURING

LOOKING AFTER EACH OTHER

Checking up on friends and sexual partners during chemsex parties is important in case their high is too intense for them to consciously consent.

MAKING SURE CONSENT CAN BE GIVEN

It is also very important not to proceed with what we want to do if the other person is not able to consent. Someone in a G-hole or a K-hole will not be able to express whether they want to participate in any activity.

AFTER

IF THINGS WENT WRONG

We should take as much time as we need. Having people we trust around us can be helpful. Pressuring ourselves to speak immediately about our experience is not. It is also important to seek out well-trained professional or community help and care. Signs that things took hold over us and maybe we were traumatised include flashbacks (in everyday life, in dreams or during sexual activities), mood swings or persistent negative emotions, avoidance of sexual activities or a craving to use substances that gets out of control.

CHECKING IN WITH PARTNERS

It is also important to be open to talk about the experience afterwards. A good experience can only be enhanced through communication, while a bad one can be addressed and perhaps partly mitigated, if participants look after each other.

In many legal systems around the world, sexual assault is punishable by law. Getting a person who may not be able to consent involved in sexual activities is also a criminal offence. Looking beyond the legal issues of the matter, moreover, consent has to do with the ways in which we come into contact with other people, be that in the context of a relationship, a date or a hook-up. In order for the experience to be fun for everyone, all participants need to respect each other's right to self-determination, and that any person can withdraw consent at any time, even when things have gotten intense.