

June 2010

The Safer Crack Use Program

City of Toronto policy

Toronto City Council adopted the Toronto Drug Strategy in December 2005. This strategy provides a comprehensive approach to alcohol and other drug use that includes prevention, harm reduction, treatment and enforcement responses. Among the approved actions was the expansion of harm reduction outreach services, including Toronto Public Health's Safer Crack Use Program.

What is the Safer Crack Use Program?

The Safer Crack Use Program includes the following four components:

- The distribution of new equipment to reduce sharing and the potential for disease transmission and crack use-related injuries. A basic kit contains two glass stems, 10 screens, one chopstick and alcohol swabs.
- Education and counselling on reducing risky behaviours associated with the smoking of crack cocaine.
- Referrals to a broad range of health and social services, and facilitating access to these services for people who smoke crack cocaine.
- Capacity and skills building among service providers to identify and respond to crack smoking-related issues among their clients and within their neighbourhoods.

Why does the City of Toronto support the Safer Crack Use Program?

The Safer Crack Use Program is one harm reduction measure intended to improve the City of Toronto's response to a high-risk and underserved group of drug users. Specifically, the program helps to:

- *Reach isolated and disconnected people:* People who smoke crack cocaine are among the most isolated groups of people who use drugs in our community. Most have little or no contact with health or social services. The kits have proven to be a valuable tool for outreach workers to initiate and maintain contact with this at-risk population. Giving users something they want helps workers build trusting relationships, which in turn helps connect people with supports in the community such as health care, treatment, social services, shelter and housing.
- *Reduce the spread of disease:* Many people who use crack cocaine are unaware of the associated risks for disease transmission. Sharing crack stems can be a means of Hepatitis C transmission. High risk sexual practices, which are associated with the use of crack cocaine, also increase the risk for HIV, Hepatitis B and other sexually transmitted diseases. A report documenting best practices for needle exchange in Ontario recommends the unlimited distribution of glass stems, mouthpieces and screens to help prevent the transmission of HIV, HCV and other blood borne pathogens through the sharing of equipment used to smoke crack cocaine and other drugs.ⁱ

Who delivers the Safer Crack Use Program?

Toronto Public Health manages the Safer Crack Use Program through its needle exchange program, *The Works*. The Works also delivers the program through its fixed site and mobile outreach services. Toronto Public Health also contracts with 24 community agencies who deliver this program in various areas across Toronto. The Program is delivered by agency and outreach staff, including peer workers. All participating agencies must adhere to the Toronto Public Health Protocols for the Distribution of Safer Crack Use Supplies, which includes guidelines for supply distribution, health and safety guidelines, staff training and reporting requirements.

Doesn't this program encourage drug use?

Harm reduction activities aim to reduce the harms associated with substance use for individuals, families and the community. It can include, but does not require, abstinence. In Toronto, a range of community-based, government and institutional agencies deliver harm reduction services. As with other harm reduction measures, there is no evidence that the distribution of safer crack use kits encourages drug use. Only people who are already using crack cocaine participate in the Safer Crack Use Program. The reasons people use drugs are not related to the availability of harm reduction programs but rather are linked to a wide range of individual and systemic factors.

What is crack cocaine?

Cocaine is a central nervous system stimulant extracted from the Coca plant. It is a whitish powder that is usually snorted but can also be injected or taken orally. Crack is cocaine that has been chemically treated with ammonia or baking-powder, creating small lumps or rocks. The term “crack” refers to the crackling sound heard when a rock is heated. Crack cocaine can be either smoked or injected. When smoked, the drug penetrates the thin lung tissue, enters the blood stream, the heart and then the brain. This allows extremely high doses of cocaine to reach the brain very quickly and brings an intense and immediate high that lasts 5 to 10 minutes.

What are the risks associated with using crack cocaine?

The Toronto Drug Strategy concludes that crack cocaine is the illicit drug of most concern in Toronto. While people of all socio-economic backgrounds use crack, people who are homeless, street-involved or otherwise living in poverty have high rates of use and experience more profound impacts due to multiple risk factors including:

- **Unsafe sex:** Some people engage in risky sexual behaviour while using crack (e.g., unprotected sex in exchange for money/drugs or unprotected sex with other drug users or multiple partners).
- **Using and sharing unsafe equipment:** Use of makeshift smoking pipes such as aluminum cans, car antennas and broken bottles can cause burns and sores on the lips or mouth and may create an entry point for HIV, Hepatitis C and other diseases. The transmission of disease could occur when these pipes are shared, a frequent practice.
- **Injection drug use:** Some people also inject crack cocaine. During compulsive or “binge” episodes, people may inject many times over the course of a day, thereby increasing the risk of HIV and/or other infectious diseases.

For more information on the Safer Crack Use Program, please contact:

**The Works
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For more information on the Toronto Drug Strategy, please visit

www.toronto.ca/health/drugstrategy

ⁱ Strike C, Leonard L, Millson M, Anstice S, Berkeley N, Medd E. (2006) *Ontario Needle Exchange Programs: Best Practice Recommendations*. Toronto: Ontario Needle Exchange Coordinating Committee.