

June 2006

Distribution of Safer Crack Use Kits

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 is the expansion of harm reduction outreach services including the provision of safer crack use kits.

What is a safer crack use kit?

In Toronto, the Safer Crack Use Coalition pioneered the distribution of safer crack use kits in response to growing health concerns for people who use crack cocaine. The kits include information on disease prevention practices and supplies such as glass stems, mouthpieces and metal screens to help prevent oral injuries like cuts and burns, which may reduce the potential for disease transmission. They may also contain alcohol swabs, condoms and lip balm.

Why is the City of Toronto distributing safer crack use kits?

The distribution of safer crack use kits is one harm reduction measure intended to improve the City's response to a high-risk and underserved group of drug users. Specifically, the safer use kits will help to:

1. Reach isolated and disconnected people: People who use crack cocaine are one of the most isolated groups of drug users 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.
2. Reduce the spread of disease: Many people who use crack cocaine are unaware of the associated risks for infectious disease transmission. Sharing crack stems may 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 recent reportⁱ documenting best practices in 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.

Who will be distributing safer crack use kits?

Toronto Public Health will distribute the kits through its needle exchange program, The Works. Safer crack use kits will be distributed through The Works main office, mobile program and street outreach and also through community agencies across Toronto that are contracted by Toronto Public Health to deliver this service. The kits will be distributed by agency and outreach staff, including peer workers.

All distributing agencies must adhere to the Toronto Public Health Protocols for the Distribution of Safer Crack Use Supplies, which include supply distribution, health and safety guidelines, staff training and reporting requirements.

Don't these kits encourage drug use?

Harm reduction activities aim to reduce the harms associated with substance use for individuals, families and communities. 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. Kits are only given to people who already use crack cocaine. 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 five to 10 minutes. Some smokers will scrape the residue left over in their pipe and inject it (using lemon juice, vinegar or vitamin C powder and water to convert it to a liquid form).

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 injection 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 distribution of safer crack use kits, please contact:

**The Works
Toronto Public Health
416-392-0521**

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.