



Do you have feedback about this booklet?

Do you have artwork, poetry, or writing that you would like to send us to use in future harm reduction booklets?

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**TAKING
CARE ...**

OF OURSELVES & THOSE WE CARE ABOUT



**HARM REDUCTION
RECREATIONAL USE OF
GABAPENTIN**

PASAN can't make these booklets alone.

It is only with the knowledge and expertise of those with lived and living experiences, both inside and outside of prison walls, that we can put together this information to share with others. Most importantly, to share with prisoners.

We welcome that this booklet may be shared within different institutions as well as outside of prison walls, and we hope that you find something useful from it no matter where you are. It's also important to know that how this information is put together is meant for prisoners, especially those in federal institutions.

Because what harm reduction looks like on the outside is not the same as what harm reduction can look like on the inside – where the exact resources and supports we need are not always available when and how we need them.

We want to give sincere thanks to all of the participants who shared their knowledge, their experiences, and their ideas with us to inform this booklet.

Your ongoing support and guidance helps PASAN continue to make resources that are relevant and important for prisoners inside.



PASAN believes
HARM REDUCTION MEANS that –

Everyone is deserving of health, connection, and well-being. So...

We remove our judgement and work to minimize harmful effects of actions rather than simply ignore or condemn them.

Remember our medicines are all different and what works for one does not work for all.

We are complex, multi-faceted people that will not share the same goals– or have the same needs – the best expert is the self. Our healing is unique to our experience and who we are, it cannot be done without our whole selves involved.

We focus on what's possible and not on what's out of our control.
That means what's possible in my situation, environment, relationships, etc.

We acknowledge that there are systemic and institutional factors that take away choice and cause harm in people's lives, relationships, communities. We work to bring choice and self-direction back into focus.

All things are connected, we work from their intersections– a whole person approach to a whole person problem.

The who, what, why, where, when is important– the best results come from when the people who are impacted are involved in the solution. With listening and consultation, we find the right directions.

We believe that there is a better, more compassionate, kind and effective way to practice justice in our communities. Our current system punishes and isolates, harm reduction finds common ground and restores relationships.



WHAT COMMUNITY IS SAYING:

"don't shake and bake it! use a clean cup, small bowl or bottle cap even with clean water – and a filter!"

"if you're using cotton to filter, wet the cotton first before you put it in your liquid. you get less particles."

"I used cigarette filters when I had them, clean and unsmoked ones. I liked them better than using paper or cotton."

"I keep my own rig. I use the bleach that medical gives out and I clean it and then rinse it with water 10 times after each use."

"sometimes I give my veins a break and will do a muscle shot or hoop-it instead."

We understand that there is very limited access to gear on the inside. It's important to still try and use new materials each time we use, and to not share the materials we do have access to.

Feel free to call us at PASAN to talk more about this (CAN wide)

You can also request that we add your name for a one-to-one visit if we're able to visit your institution (ONT only)

Are you currently in a federal institution within Canada and ...

Is there a needle exchange program or overdose prevention site in your institution? Do you have questions about it?

Do you have feedback about the gaps between the health and harm reduction information we are sharing and how it really is on the inside?

Want to tell us what resources would you like to see more of?

You can write to us or call us about this too.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?



Because rates of HIV and

Hepatitis-C (Hep-C) are higher inside prisons, where access to adequate equipment and supplies is low or often not available at all.

This booklet is meant to share some harm-reduction practices for recreational substance use, because knowing how our substances of choice affect us and how to consume them more safely can reduce our chances of HIV and Hep-C, and is good for taking care of our overall health and well-being.

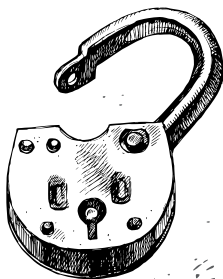
But this booklet is only a small collection of information, so please ask for and check out additional resources for more information and further knowledge on safer practices.

The Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange (CATIE) has some great booklets, such as: *Sharp Shooters: Harm Reduction Info for Safer Injection Drug Use* and *Safer Snorting*, or PASAN's *Staying Healthy Behind the Walls: Hepatitis C and HIV in Prison*, plus many others.

Some of the instructions or tips for safer practices in many of the different resources may not be available or possible for folks on the inside. These resources are still important though, because they share a lot of information that is still very helpful, and maybe even life saving.

Another super important resource are the allies and trusted people around you. Check in with the person or people you trust, ask them questions, brainstorm with them – what works and what doesn't, what's safe or not, what does access look like, etc. – and look after each other.

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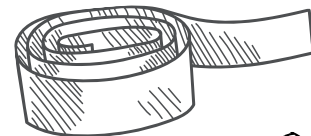
SOME SAFER SNORTING PRACTICES ARE:

- Don't share equipment – or keep your own straw/tube/etc. to use each time
- Rinse out your straw/tube multiple times with water after each use to avoid any buildup
- If no equipment, bump off the back of your clean hand
- Wash your hands and any surfaces you plan to use
- Crush substances into as fine a powder as possible
- Rinse nostrils with small amount of water or saline solution (salt water) before snorting
- Cover opposite nostril, aim straw toward middle of nose/septum and inhale slowly (to avoid inhaling substance into sinuses)
- Switch back and forth between nostrils when snorting
- When doing larger doses, do multiple smaller lines / bumps, rather than one or two big ones
- Rinse nostrils with small amount of water or saline solution

SAFER INJECTING

We don't know much about injecting Gabbies, but we know that it's important to take extra care when injecting any substance.

- New equipment and supplies every time is always safest
- If you can't use new, keep your own equipment and supplies for yourself to re-use again
- When re-using, flush needle and syringe several times with clean, cold or room-temperature water after each use so it doesn't become clogged with blood or other matter
- Safest body part for injections is our arms (above wrist to below the shoulder)
- Clean injection site thoroughly and apply warmth to site after injection to avoid abscesses forming
- Rotate your injection sites to give them time to heal
- Avoid injecting into veins that are tender, or hardened, or inflamed





SAFER USE 101

Hepatitis-C is a virus that is passed from person to person only through blood. **HIV** is a virus that is spread through blood, through sexual fluids (*no, not saliva – vaginal, penile, and anal sexual fluids*), and can be passed from parent to child through breast feeding.

In the prison environment, sharing equipment is one of the easiest ways to spread active blood-borne viruses and other infections.

Safer-use and harm reduction practices are not only meant to help prevent the spread of these viruses, but also to prevent instances of drug toxicity and overdose.

THE SUPER BASICS

- Don't use alone
- Wash your hands before using
- Sharing is NOT caring – never share your equipment!
- Start low, go slow – try to use a small test dose first
- Avoid mixing substances
- Know what to do in case of drug toxicity & overdose

SAFER SNORTING

When snorting, our substance of choice is absorbed through our nasal membranes. Because Gabbies are not made for this, we risk more damage to the inner lining of our nasal passages, which increases our risk for different bacteria and viruses to enter our body. This damage can also cause the tiniest amounts of blood to seep out – that blood gets on whatever equipment we are using (straw, tube, paper, etc.).

These tiny amounts of blood leave us at higher risk for the Hep-C virus. And we know that Hep-C is a virus that can be passed through little drops of blood that are so small we could never see them. Because of this, sharing equipment with others is a super easy way for Hep-C to spread from person to person.

WHAT'S RECREATIONAL DRUG USE?

This booklet is going to focus specifically on **RECREATIONAL PRESCRIPTION DRUG USE**.

Recreational drug use is when we use a drug that has been prescribed by a doctor in order to feel their effects, but for non medical reasons.

It could be our own prescription that maybe we take an extra of so that we feel the effects differently. Or it could be someone else's prescription of a drug that our body isn't as used to taking, or maybe isn't used to at all.

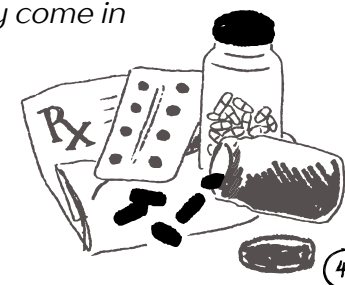
Those non medical effects from the drug could feel like a brief escape from our current reality and situation, it could be to numb ourselves, it could be for our own enjoyment because the effects feel good.

There are many different reasons why we might use prescription drugs for non medical reasons.

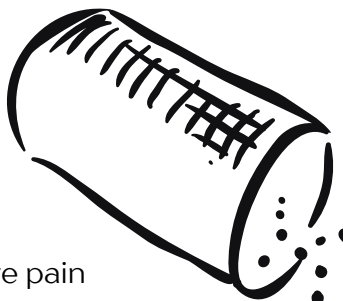
"But I don't do that stuff."

That's okay. This information is for everyone. You never know when this knowledge may come in handy and be helpful.

So whether for yourself, for those you care about, or just because – read on!



RECREATIONAL USE OF: GABAPENTIN



Gabapentin (*Gabby* or *Gabbies*) is commonly prescribed to treat epilepsy (seizures) and nerve pain (caused by a variety of conditions). Less commonly for anxiety, mood disorders (eg. bipolar), sleep disorders, alcohol and cannabis withdrawal, and restless leg syndrome.

It is known as an *anticonvulsant* or *antiepileptic* drug. There are different brand names of Gabapentin out there, including: Horizant, Gralise, and Neurontin.

Those using Gabby for non medical reasons often use it because it can create a feeling of calm and relaxation for some, and for others a feeling of euphoria (an intense state of excitement or happiness) or feeling invincible. It is most commonly taken orally or snorted.

Medical professionals say that the maximum dose of Gabapentin is 3600mg in one day, but it's difficult to say what the safest dose is for taking it when it's not prescribed.

We have to think about how much our body can handle, how much do we weigh, are we taking any other drugs that may mix badly with it or do we have any other health factors that are relevant? Also, have we eaten and are we hydrated enough? Plus many other things to take into account.

Talk to others about dosing!

How do they do it? What do they consider and factor in? What are their practices? etc.



WHAT ABOUT ANTIVIRALS FOR HEP-C?

Same goes for Hep-C treatment. In fact, that same study suggested the same thing for Hep-C treatment and Gabbies.



Gabapentin has a decent list of drugs that have either known or possible interactions – including opiates and opioids, antidepressants and anti-anxiety meds, antihistamines, and more.

Think *drugs that make me slow down, make me sleepy or drowsy, etc.* These types of drugs will likely cause side effects to be worse and raise the risk for overdose.

It's important to remember that there are many different factors for each and every one of us that impact how a drug or its side effects might impact us. All the more reason to make sure we're practicing safer-use and harm reduction practices!



MANAGING THE COME DOWN...



- stay hydrated and eat regularly
(dehydration and low blood sugar can increase seizure risk and can make dizziness and confusion worse)
- limit caffeine intake – this can help to lessen jitters & anxiety

"sugar packets!"

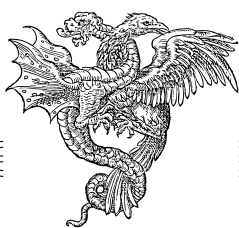
"quiet space,
deep
breaths."

"yeah!
or juice crystals, or
sugar water."

"just eating in
general really
helped for me."

- salted water can help with hydration
($\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of salt to 1 litre of water – so really, just a small pinch!)

MEDICATION



INTERACTIONS

Mixing Gabapentin with downers (alcohol, benzos, opioids, etc.) which depresses our central nervous system (*heart rate, breathing, consciousness, etc.*) can increase our risk of seizures / overdose and other side effects.

WHAT ABOUT METHADONE?

While mixing Gabapentin and opioids or opioid like drugs (eg. Methadone) are not recommended, some studies show that low doses of Gabapentin while on Methadone treatment can help with pain symptoms during the detox stage. At higher doses though, the combination with Methadone runs a higher risk of leading to overdose and/or experiencing slowed reflexes, excessive sleepiness, and slowed breathing and heart rate.


AND SUBOXONE?

Same goes for Suboxone. Both Methadone and Suboxone may be safe to take in combination with Gabapentin under a doctor or nurse's guidance, but on our own we need to take extra caution.

WHAT IF I TAKE ANTIVIRALS FOR HIV?

There are little to no serious interactions between Gabapentin and different HIV antiviral medication. There is always possibility though that some combination of drugs may increase either drug's side effects. One study suggests that taking Gabby at a higher dose regularly, while also taking antivirals, may effect mood / mental status over time.

WHAT COMMUNITY IS SAYING:



"I never got drowsy on it really, but it made my eyes burn pretty bad."

"It made me feel extra sensitive to my environment or something, like hyper aware of everything and it was really impacting my mood, especially when I was coming down."

"I don't like to do it too often. When I was doing it daily [orally] it was hard to function day-to-day. And when I take large doses orally or snort it, I can't sleep for days."

"It was a really mellow high for me."

"When I was inside, 3200-4000mg orally lasted all day. I could exercise on it, felt euphoric, felt good, energetic, like the opposite of valium. Would give me a little bit of gut rot though."

"it feels a little bit PCP and a little bit like ecstasy, but I dunno' maybe that's just me!"

"It helped with my sleep, made me foggy. I had some issues with my memory. Made me really thirsty too, nasty mouth, kinda' irritable too. And hard to regulate my temperature."

POTENTIAL GABBY SIDE EFFECTS

[This booklet does not include every single side effect or symptom]

Anyone taking Gabapentin on a prescribed daily basis may experience some side effects. Some common side effects are:

- * Feeling tired
- * Drowsiness
- * Dizziness
- * Headaches
- * Vision issues: double or blurred vision
- * Memory problems
- * Problems with balance, feeling shaky
- * Body aches & chills
- * Gut issues (nausea, vomiting, diarrhea etc.)
- * Dry mouth
- * Swelling in legs, feet, arms
- * Changes in mood

If you take it daily but then the dosage suddenly drops or if you suddenly stop taking it entirely, it's really common to experience withdrawal symptoms from Gabapentin. This could feel like any of the side effects already listed, and can also include:

- * Heart palpitations (*feels like your heart is skipping beats*)
- * Muscle spasms and cramps
- * Excessive sweating
- * Difficulty managing body temperature
- * Increased anxiety
- * Flu-like symptoms

If Gabapentin has been prescribed for a specific treatment like epilepsy or nerve pain and there is a sudden decrease to the dose or the dosage is stopped entirely, then symptoms of these conditions might return (eg. seizures, increase in pain, etc.).

When using Gabby recreationally, especially if taking high doses, it's not surprising that our come down might include some Gabby side effects and/or withdrawal symptoms.

Withdrawal symptoms and side effects can be different for different people. It might depend on our tolerance and sensitivities, other medications we take or health conditions we have, etc. and can range from very mild to severe. And some people don't experience side effects at all (*lucky!*).



CAN I OVERDOSE ON GABAPENTIN?

Although there are serious withdrawal side effects, it's difficult to overdose on Gabapentin alone. Overdoses related to Gabbies are usually reported for people who have mixed Gabapentin with other drugs, such as alcohol or opioids and other downers.

While it's difficult to overdose on gabbies, of course it's not impossible. Most symptoms of potential gabapentin toxicity/ overdose will be related to an overall severe slowing-down of the body's systems: drowsiness, muscle weakness, lethargy and drooping eyelids can be expected. Other gabapentin overdose symptoms can include diarrhea and sedation.

SIGNS OF AN OPIOID OVERDOSE / DRUG POISONING

Opioids affect one person's body differently than another. An overdose may happen after periods of long use, or if our body isn't used to the amount in our system.

Opioids slow down the body's heart rate and breathing.

Signs that someone may be having an opioid overdose are . . .

- *Dropping suddenly
- *Not moving & CAN'T be woken
- *Very slow or no breathing
- *Rigid or stiff body
- *Very tiny pupils
- *Cold or clammy skin
- *Choking, gurgling, or snorting sounds
- *Blue or grey/ashen lips, nails and tips of ears – *when you pinch their nailbed, the colour doesn't come back*

***GIVING NALOXONE TEMPORARILY REVERSES OPIOID OVERDOSE** and is not harmful if it turns out the person is not overdosing). Naloxone only lasts for about 30min to 1.5hr. The toxic drugs will take over again once it wears off, so it's important to stay with the person. It is recommended to seek medical attention during and/or after an overdose. Most institutions only allow staff to carry and administer Naloxone, but some minimum-security institutions have kits available in the units - ask a trusted person to find out what your access to Naloxone is on the inside.

Does the person respond to you if you nudge them or call their name? If the answer is yes, then they are good for now.

*OVERDOSE VS. NODDING OFF

Opioids slow the body down. Someone might be in a semi-conscious state after using and even have slower breathing, but are feeling pretty good. But it's important to keep an eye on them and their breathing, slipping into overdose territory can happen quickly.