

Frequently Asked Questions: Supervised Consumption Sites in Canada

This resource answers frequently asked questions about supervised consumption services in Canada. This information can be used by service providers to answer questions from stakeholders and community members and to inform public-facing communications.

1. What does “harm reduction” mean?

Harm reduction is an approach to prevent the health and social harms related to substance use. It supports the health and safety of people who use substances and our broader society.

This approach supports people who use substances to use safer practices, without judgment and without necessarily requiring them to stop using substances. Harm reduction is part of a spectrum of substance use services alongside treatment and recovery.

Supervised consumption sites are one form of harm reduction. Harm reduction exists in other facets of our lives to reduce harms that people may experience from participating in a potentially risky activity. For example, wearing seatbelts in a car is a form of harm reduction. Harm reduction can be something as simple as eating food before drinking alcohol.

2. Do supervised consumption sites prevent overdoses?

Supervised consumption sites are proven to be highly effective at preventing overdoses and saving lives.

Substance use is a reality, but overdose deaths can be prevented. Sadly, every day, 22 Canadians die due to overdose from the toxic drug supply.¹ Most of these deaths occur because no one is available to intervene.

Supervised consumption sites are the only place where people who use substances can access healthcare workers trained to reverse accidental overdoses. In a six-year period, trained frontline staff at services in Canada reversed about 49,000 accidental overdoses.² In Ontario alone, supervised 16 overdoses are responded to each day at supervised consumption sites.²

Without these services, people who use substances will use them elsewhere and will potentially die alone if they overdose without help nearby.

¹ <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/substance-related-harms/opioids-stimulants/>

² <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/datalab/supervised-consumption-sites-blog.html>

3. What are supervised consumption sites?

Supervised consumption sites are health services where people can use drugs obtained outside the site, while being monitored for overdose and other medical emergencies by trained healthcare workers. They are essential to saving lives and ensuring safety for all community members.

Many of these services have been operating for years as an established part of our healthcare system. Across Canada, they prevent and reverse overdoses, many of which would otherwise be fatal. They serve other public health functions, such as preventing the spread of infectious diseases such as hepatitis C and HIV.

Organizations who operate these sites also connect people to other important health and social services, including addiction treatment services, mental health services, food banks and housing services. In Canada between 2017 and 2023, staff made over 250,000 referrals to these services.²

4. Why do we need supervised consumption sites?

Substance use is a reality. Because of a toxic drug supply, people are dying from overdoses. Supervised consumption sites save lives and reduce demand on our already strained healthcare system.

More than 360,000 Canadians visited supervised consumption services 4.3 million times between 2017 and June 2023. During this time, frontline workers reversed about 49,000 overdoses and drug-related medical emergencies on site.²

Without supervised consumption services, the system will face more 911 calls and more clogged emergency rooms, resulting in higher costs and more lives lost to overdose.

5. We're in a toxic drug crisis. Why not focus on stopping drug use instead?

Supervised consumption sites do not encourage drug use. Instead, they strive to reduce harms related to it – for people who use substances and the wider community.

Substance use is complex, and people use them for many different reasons. Our services must recognize complex relationships and provide people with options that meet them where they are, whether it's to be safe from overdose or to stop using drugs all together.

Supervised consumption sites prevent overdose deaths and reduce the transmission of infectious diseases. They also facilitate access to addiction treatment options, including increasing both referrals to and uptake of programs such as withdrawal management and opioid agonist treatment.

6. Do supervised consumption sites work?

Supervised consumption sites are proven to prevent overdose deaths and reduce harms for people who use drugs. In short, they save lives.

Substance use is a reality. Supervised consumption services provide a much-needed way to improve safety for the people who use substances and the broader community.

Evidence shows that they:

- Reduce opioid-related emergency department visits and overdose-related ambulance calls, which alleviates the burden on our strained health system;³
- Reduce public drug use and discarded needles, which can reduce “nuisance” for the broader community; and⁴
- Support access to other health and social services, including withdrawal management and treatment services.

7. Wouldn't it be better to have treatment centres instead of supervised consumption sites?

Harm reduction, including supervised consumption sites, is part of a broad spectrum of necessary substance use services, which also includes addiction treatment and recovery options. Focusing on treatment alone, without other parts of this spectrum, can leave people behind – placing them at risk of fatal overdose and preventing their chance of recovery.

Supervised consumption services offer referrals to other on-site and off-site services, including counselling, medical care and treatment and recovery services. They are an important part of our healthcare system and fill a gap in a strained system. Without them, we would have higher costs and more strain on emergency rooms.

8. Don't supervised consumption sites make communities less safe?

Research suggests these services do not lead to increases in crime in the areas surrounding them.³

Supervised consumption sites are also effective at reducing public drug use and discarded needles.

(Adapt this for your organization):

We work closely with the community to determine the best hours of operation that work for the neighborhood. We also take meaningful steps to prevent used supplies, including needles, from being discarded in the area around our site.

Trained health and security staff ensure people entering and leaving the site are safe, as well as members of the community who live, work and play near it.

Additional information about supervised consumption services:

- [Harm reduction in action: Supervised consumption services and overdose prevention sites](#)
(CATIE)
- [Reducing harms for people who use drugs: Emerging approaches and time-honoured programs](#)
(CATIE)
- [WHY SCS](#) (CRISM)