

Safer supply: Frequently Asked Questions

Background

“Safer supply” is a broadly applied term for the prescribing of drugs as an alternative to the illegal market. In safer supply programs, medical providers offer a regulated supply of prescribed drugs. For people who are experiencing addiction to opioids, like fentanyl, or stimulants, like methamphetamine, this approach can be a lifesaving alternative to buying drugs on the street, and provides an opportunity for connection to other supportive health and social services¹.

In the midst of a drug overdose epidemic, most heavily attributed to fentanyl and in combination with other drugs², the Washington state Substance Use Recovery Services Advisory Committee (SURSAC) acknowledged the importance of inclusion of interventions aimed at addressing the toxic street drug supply in the [SURS Plan](#), which was published in 2022. An intervention used in other countries is known as safe supply. This model provides people using drugs the opportunity to be prescribed pharmaceutical drugs where the content and quantity are known. This is much safer than people being exposed to unregulated, unknown quantities of street drugs. The Safe Supply Workgroup was formed in 2023 to evaluate models and make policy and program recommendations to the state legislature.

What is Safer supply?

Safer supply refers to the prescription and administration of regulated and quality-controlled substances to individuals with substance use disorders as an alternative to the purchasing of illegal drugs³. In doing so, safer supply programs reduce the risks of overdose and infectious disease associated with unregulated drugs that are purchased on the street.

Is this the same as “safe supply”?

The term "safer supply" emphasizes the reduction of harm rather than the complete elimination of risk. It recognizes that while we can provide safer alternatives, no drug use, prescribed nor illegal, is without risk. Safer supply is a less commonly used term that was originally developed to advocate for these programs in Canada.

¹ Leddie S, Garg R, Cheng C, Kolla G, Antoniou T, Bouck Z, Gomes T. Prescribed safer opioid supply: A scoping review of the evidence. *Intl J Drug Policy*. 2024 March; 125:104339. doi: [10.1016/j.drugpo.2024.104339](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2024.104339).

² Ciccarone D. The rise of illicit fentanyls, stimulants and the fourth wave of the opioid overdose crisis. *Curr Opin Psychiatry*. 2021 Jul 1;34(4):344-350. doi:10.1097/YCO.0000000000000717.

³³ Speed KA, Choi J, Felicella G, Sedgemore KO, Mok WY, Milloy MJ, DeBeck K, Kerr T, Hayashi K. Preferred pharmaceutical-grade opioids to reduce the use of unregulated opioids: A cross-sectional analysis among people who use unregulated opioids in Vancouver, Canada. *Int J Drug Policy*. 2024 Oct;132:104564. doi: [10.1016/j.drugpo.2024.104564](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2024.104564).

Will safer supply encourage people to use drugs who have never used before?

Safer supply programs are intended for people who are already using drugs and experiencing unmanageable problems or hardship resulting from their drug use. Someone who has never used drugs would not be eligible for a safer supply program.

Like other harm reduction programs⁴⁵, research suggest that providing safer supply does not encourage people who have never used drugs people to start. Instead, it supports those already using substances by providing safer options and reducing the harms associated with illicit drug use.⁶

What if safer supply program participants give their drugs to other people?

When drugs are given to someone other than for whom they are prescribed, they have been diverted. Diversion of any drug is a risky situation for the person who is not taking their prescription and for the person receiving the transferred drug because it may not be medically appropriate. Safer supply programs are designed with safeguards to minimize the risk of diversion while still ensuring access to those who need it. Safeguards include observed consumption of drugs, limiting take-home medication access, urine screens, and open conversation between patients and providers.

How is safer supply different than other opioid treatment medications like methadone and buprenorphine?

Medications to treat opioid use disorder (MOUD) like methadone and buprenorphine are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration specifically for the treatment of opioid use disorder. Safer supply programs are very similar to methadone and buprenorphine programs, because they provide medication in a controlled environment to prevent craving and withdrawal symptoms for individuals who have developed a physical dependence on a drug. They are different because safer supply programs provide more medication options for individuals taking substances, and these medications are not considered treatment for opioid use disorder. Safer supply programs are focused on giving access to prescribed doses of safer alternatives to illicit drugs.

Why is safer supply important?

The safer supply initiative is important because it addresses the public health crisis of opioid overdoses and drug-related deaths, which are largely fueled by the unregulated, toxic street drug supply. By providing safer

⁴ Kerr T, Tyndall MW, Zhang R, Lai C, Montaner JS, Wood E. Circumstances of first injection among illicit drug users accessing a medically supervised safer injection facility. *Am J Public Health*. 2007 Jul;97(7):1228-30. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2006.086256. Epub 2007 May 30. PMID: 17538061; PMCID: PMC1913080.

⁵ Potier C, Lapr votte V, Dubois-Arber F, Cottencin O, Rolland B. Supervised injection services: what has been demonstrated? A systematic literature review. *Drug Alcohol Depend*. 2014 Dec 1;145:48-68. doi: 10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2014.10.012. Epub 2014 Oct 23. PMID: 25456324.

⁶ Shaleesa Ledlie, Ria Garg, Clare Cheng, Gillian Kolla, Tony Antoniou, Zachary Bouck, Tara Gomes, Prescribed safer opioid supply: A scoping review of the evidence, *International Journal of Drug Policy*, Volume 125, 2024, 104339, ISSN 0955-3959, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2024.104339>.

(<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0955395924000240>)

alternatives, a safer supply program saves lives, and improves health outcomes along the way⁷. People who participate in safer supply programs achieve self-determined goals of reduced participation in crime and increases in employment, housing, and other activities that improve wellbeing and productivity⁸.

How does safer supply work?

A person can walk into a safer supply program and speak with a medical professional immediately. They will be screened for substance use disorder and the provider will ask them questions about their drug use and treatment history. The provider, working in partnership with the patient, will determine the best treatment regimen for them at that time. In some cases, the patient will receive and consume their medication on-site under medical supervision. Others may receive a prescription that they can pick up at a pharmacy and consume in their own time. Programs also offer counseling, connection to infectious disease testing and treatment, wound care, and harm reduction resources. Safer supply is always accompanied with safer use education and harm reduction supplies.

Are safer supply programs available nationwide?

No, safer supply programs for opioids and stimulants are not currently available in the United States. However, in the United States, we practice other forms of safer supply, such as a bar for alcohol use. States that have legalized or regulated cannabis are providing a safer supply option. Safer supply is a concept that has been long researched, practiced, and evaluated in Canada and Europe. Research studies from the last 30 years demonstrate positive impacts of safer supply on individuals and communities.

What are the potential benefits of safer supply?

Benefits of Safer Supply include reduced overdose rates, lower transmission rates of infectious diseases, reduced healthcare costs, improved access to healthcare services, and enhanced stability for individuals in recovery.¹

How is safer supply different from traditional drug treatment?

The goal of a safer supply program is to stop overdose deaths and link people to more stable care. Safer supply is a harm reduction intervention, intended for people who are not ready for a comprehensive treatment program. Drug treatment success is often defined as achieving abstinence from all substances. Harm reduction, while it supports people who choose abstinence, also embraces any positive change someone makes toward better health and wellbeing. Harm reduction programs engage people while they achieve self-determined goals that may or may not include abstinence. Safer supply promotes health, safety, and self-determination, and accepts that some individuals may not be ready or able to stop using drugs entirely.

⁷ Gomes T, Kolla G, McCormack D, Sereda A, Kitchen S, Antoniou T. Clinical outcomes and health care costs among people entering a safer opioid supply program in Ontario. *CMAJ* 2022 September 19;194:E1233-42. doi: 10.1503/cmaj.220892

⁸ Gagnon M, Rudzinski K, Guta A, Schmidt RA, Kryszajtys DT, Kolla G, Strike C. Impact of safer supply programs on injection practices: client and provider experiences in Ontario, Canada. *Harm Reduct J* 20, 81 (2023). doi: 10.1186/s12954-023-00817-7.

How do safer supply programs ensure the quality of substances provided?

Safer supply programs operate under regulated medical guidelines, ensuring that substances are prescribed by qualified professionals and obtained from licensed pharmacies, thereby ensuring quality control.

How do safer supply programs address stigma associated with drug use?

By providing a supportive and non-judgmental environment, safer supply programs reduce stigma and promote understanding that substance use disorders are medical conditions that require compassion and treatment, tailored to the needs of the individual.

Are there any risks associated with safer supply programs?

Safer supply programs continuously monitor and manage risks among patients and providers. Risks can include diversion of prescribed substances, overdose, overprescribing, and lack of quality training for providers. While Safer Supply programs aim to reduce risks, challenges such as potential misuse of prescribed substances can occur. However, based on several decades of research, the benefits of safer supply programs far outweigh risks.

How is the success of safer supply programs measured?

Success is primarily measured by the individual outcomes of each patient. Providers will collect information from patients that can be used in evaluating both health and quality of life measures. In addition, safer supply programs are evaluated using large, aggregated criminal justice, quality of life, and health data sets. Analysis can measure impact on criminal activity and rates of overdose at the community level.

- [View a published evaluation of a safer supply program from London InterCommunity Health Care Centre.](#)

For more information, you can explore the **Drug Policy Alliance's Safer Supply Toolkit**, which provides detailed guidance on implementing and understanding safer supply programs. The toolkit is available here:

- [View the Safer Supply Toolkit](#)