

Although alcohol and drugs are usually used to relax, they may also help trans people feel better able to cope with discrimination. However, trans people are twice as likely as adults generally to drink in a way that's harmful, or potentially harmful, to their health. Alcohol, drugs and tobacco all carry a number of health risks that you may wish to understand and avoid.

General Risks

Alcohol: Alcohol can impair judgement and coordination; risk alcohol poisoning; and give you a hangover making it difficult to concentrate. Drinking larger amounts more regularly may affect your sleep patterns, result in poor mood and make you feel depressed. There is also increased risk of high blood pressure, mouth and other cancers, stroke, heart attack, and liver diseases. High levels of drinking can cause alcohol dependence and shaking, sweating, hallucinating or having seizures if you stop suddenly or attempt to cut down.

Drugs: Some drugs are stimulants, such as cocaine, ecstasy or mephedrone, which can make you feel more alert or more chatty. Some are depressants which will have a sedative effect, sometimes with a painkilling effect too, such as heroin. Others are hallucinogens where users can experience auditory and visual effects. Drugs affect people in different ways and to different degrees. A desired effect may quickly become more than intended. Overdoing drugs, especially those with a depressant effect, can be fatal.

Sometimes drugs are used to enhance sexual sensation. However, they may also impair judgement, so that you may engage in sex you would not otherwise have planned or consented to, which may carry increased risk of HIV or other sexually transmitted infections.

Users of all drugs can develop a psychological dependence. Some drugs like heroin and GHB/GBL also cause physical dependence and may require medical assistance to stop or 'detox'.

Most drugs used recreationally are illegal, and users can face prosecution for possessing them, with more severe penalties for supplying drugs – including buying them for friends.

Recently new drugs with similar chemical structures to illegal drugs have been sold as 'legal highs'. Little is known about the risks associated with these drugs, and being called 'legal' does not mean "safe".

Tobacco: Smoking is one of the biggest contributors to premature deaths. It is implicated in most cancers as well as linked to respiratory, circulatory and cardiovascular illnesses such as bronchitis, emphysema, and heart disease. Stopping smoking reduces your risk of illness or disability. It's never too late - some health benefits are experienced within hours. After 10 years your risk of heart attack will fall to that of someone who has never smoked.



Trans Health Factsheet on Alcohol, Drugs & Tobacco

Specific drug, alcohol and tobacco risks for trans people

- ▶ Drugs and alcohol are processed by the liver, like cross sex hormones. Heavy use of alcohol and/or drugs whilst taking hormones may increase the risk of liver toxicity and liver damage.
- ▶ Alcohol, drugs and tobacco and the use of hormone therapy can all increase cardiovascular risk. Taken together, they can also increase the risk already posed by hormone therapy.
- ▶ The use of non-prescribed hormones, perhaps obtained via the internet, can result in the wrong amount being taken, which could increase the risks associated with alcohol, drugs or tobacco.
- ▶ There is no certainty about the contents of unregulated drugs, meaning you never know exactly what you're taking. This makes it impossible to predict what specific interactions there may be between drugs and hormone therapy.
- ▶ Problematic drug or alcohol use and dependency may be one of the medical conditions clinicians would expect to see "reasonably well-controlled" before commencing hormone therapy or surgical treatments.
- ▶ Smoking can affect oestrogen levels, increasing the risk of osteoporosis and reducing the feminising effects of oestrogen medication.
- ▶ Tobacco smoke causes skin discoloration, wrinkles, and premature aging. Fingernails, fingers and teeth may have yellow staining. Hair retains the smell of tobacco.
- ▶ Alcohol may make you put on weight and reduce your eligibility for surgery.
- ▶ Surgeons and anaesthetists may advise you to stop smoking during and after surgery.
- ▶ Spending on alcohol, drugs and tobacco may worsen your financial situation and cause additional stress.

What you can do

- ▶ Stop smoking, particularly if you are undergoing (or plan to undergo) hormone therapy or surgery.
- ▶ Restrict alcohol consumption to no more than 2-3 units per day. UK guidance for trans people additionally recommends not exceeding 14 units per week. You should avoid alcohol for 48 hours after a heavy drinking session or binge.
- ▶ Exercise caution if using any non-prescribed drug due to not knowing what the substance contains or the acute and long-term risks.
- ▶ Have your hormone levels monitored regularly if you are using hormone therapy.

Where to get help

Alcohol: The NHS provides an online unit calculator [here](#) and a drink checker smartphone app is available through Change4Life [here](#). However, stopping dependent drinking can be dangerous without medical advice. Information about cutting down alcohol intake is available from the [NHS](#) and from [Antidote](#) at London Friend.

Drugs: Get more information about specific drugs and the risks associated with them at [FRANK](#) and [NHS Choices](#), and for LGBT people at [Antidote](#). Specialist drug (as well as alcohol) treatment services are commissioned by each local authority. Information is on their websites. Many services accept self-referral. GPs can advise on support or referral. [Antidote](#) offers a specialist LGBT treatment service and a helpline. Some LGBT organisations such as [LGBT Foundation](#) work in partnership with local services. Many LGBT and trans organisations offer counselling. A list of groups is available at www.TranzWiki.net. Private counselling is available, e.g. [Pink Therapy](#) maintains a list of counsellors.

Tobacco: Stopping smoking can be extremely difficult. There is a range of support available, including nicotine replacement products such as patches and gums, and talking therapies. E-cigarettes, although still costly, seem to reduce the health risks but their long term effects are unknown. Stop smoking services can be accessed directly at www.nhs.uk/smokefree or via your GP.