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## HIV/TB Agency, Information and Services Activity

# Sexualized Drug Use: Confronting the Alarming Issue with a Holistic Harm Reduction Approach

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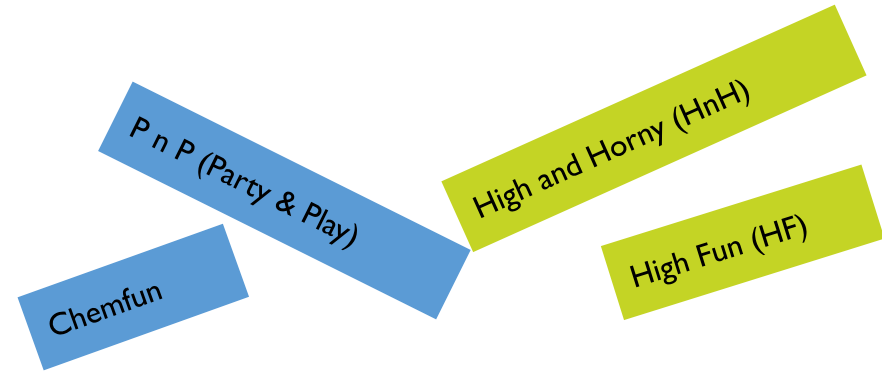
# What is sexualized drug use?

A wide range of drugs used just before or during a sexual activity – usually includes all popular drugs used by individuals including **stimulants** and **psychoactive drugs** like crystal methamphetamine and methamphetamine-based tablets, and **party drugs** (such as ecstasy, ketamine, and cocaine) can be used either alone or in combination with **other recreational drugs**, such as marijuana, poppers, or **medications for erectile dysfunction** (e.g., Viagra).



# What is chemsex?

Chemsex is a colloquial term describing a particular subset of sexualized drug use, any combination of **methamphetamine**, **mephedrone**, and **GHB/GBL** used by MSM **before** or **during** sex to facilitate a long sexual session with multiple sex partners.



Gay drug use trends have changed



# Background

HIV prevalence among MSM 8.8% overall, in notably high in Yangon (28.3%) (IBBS 2019).

Globally, chemsex is a particular **subculture among MSM**.

Chemsex practices among MSM across Asia - as low as **3.1%** to as high as **30.8%**.

The **increasing the popularity of party drug use** among young people in Myanmar.

**16% of respondents reported sexualized drug use** 2019 online survey among young MSM in Myanmar.

**IBBS MSM 2019** also reported drug use for non-medical purposes in the past 12 months was **10.9% of MSM**

**Increased risk factors** associated with drug use and chemsex which leads to

- *Increased vulnerability to and transmission of HIV, viral hepatitis, and other sexually-transmitted infections among MSM who engage chemsex*
- *Increased mental health impairment and addiction issues and other negative life impacts.*

# Why practicing chemsex?

## Personal

- Pain relief  
နာကျင်မှုသက်သာစေရန်
- For longer sexual intercourse and sexual pleasure  
လိင်ဆက်ဆံချိန် ပိုကြာမြင့်စေရန်၊ လိင်မှုကိစ္စကျေနပ်မှုရစေရန်
- Sexual adventure  
လိင်စွန့်စားမှုတခုအနေဖြင့်
- Less inhibition and social bonding  
ကြောက်စိတ်နှင့် ကန့်သတ်ချုပ်ချယ်မှုများကို ဖယ်ရှားစေရန်၊ လူမှုရေးဆိုင်ရာ ချိတ်ဆက်မှုရန်

## Social

- Easily accessible and popular in their network  
ရလွယ်လာပြီး ပိုခေတ်စားလာခြင်း
- Persuasion from social media/dating apps  
လူမှုကွန်ရက်မှလှုံ့ဆော်မှုများနှင့် ဒိတ်တင် app များ

## Environmental

- Stigma and societal rejection  
အထင်အမြင်သေးခံခြင်းနှင့် လူမှုရေးပိုင်းဆိုင်ရာပစ်ပယ်ခံရခြင်း
- Homophobic environment  
လိင်တူမှန်းတီးသောပတ်ဝန်းကျင်
- Heteronormative social pressure  
လိင်ကွဲ ဆက်ဆံမှုကိုသာ သဘာဝဟုသတ်မှတ်ထားသော ပတ်ဝန်းကျင်

Black Tar Heroin (ဘိန်းမဲ)



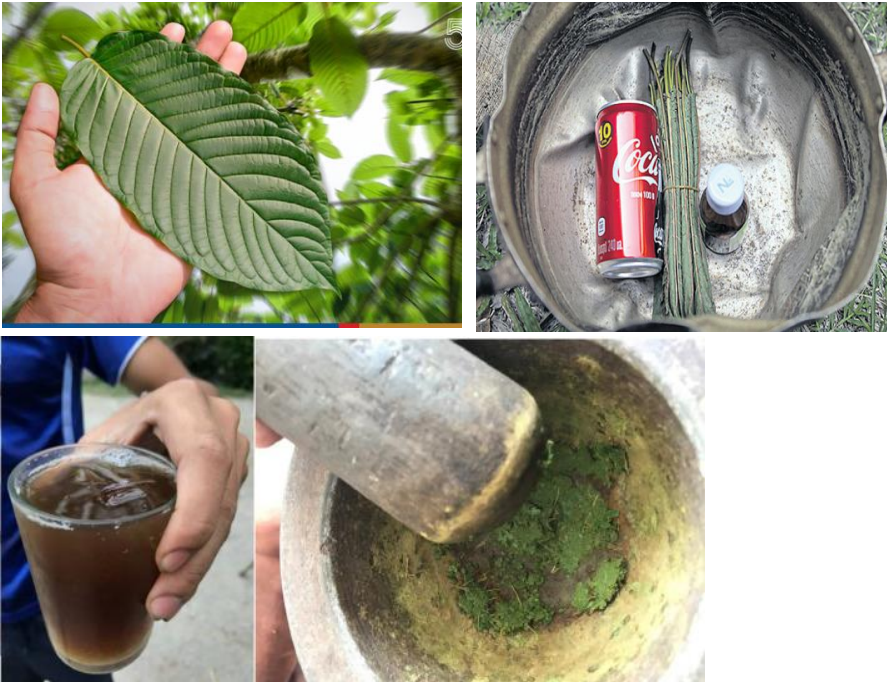
Heroin (ဘိန်းဖြူ)



Mushroom (မိုး)



Kratom cocktail (ဘိန်းစာရွက်)



Marijuana (ဆေးခြောက်)



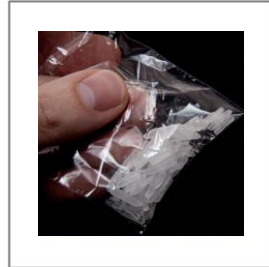
MORE →

# Common substances used for sexualized drug use

Methamphetamine based tablet



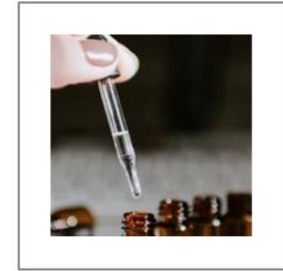
Crystal methamphetamine



Mephedrone



Gamma hydroxybutrate



K



E



Cocaine



Other: happy water, LSD, etc.







# Mode of administration

- ❑ **Ecstasy** (tablet form) → take it orally.
- ❑ **Ketamine** (powder form) → sniffing
- ❑ **WY** (tablet form), **crystal meth** (crystal form) → inhalation of the smoke burnt on the aluminum foil; pipes and bongs as inhaling instrument
- ❑ **Crystal meth** is also used as injection form, a practice know as “**slamming**” or or through a method called "**booty bumps**," which is slang for rectal administration (who wants effect immediately for sexual purpose)

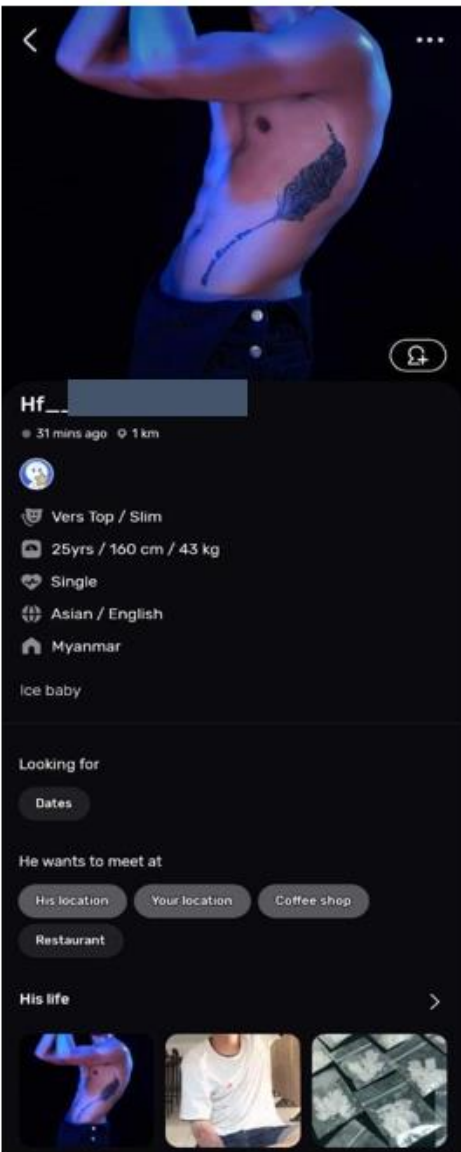
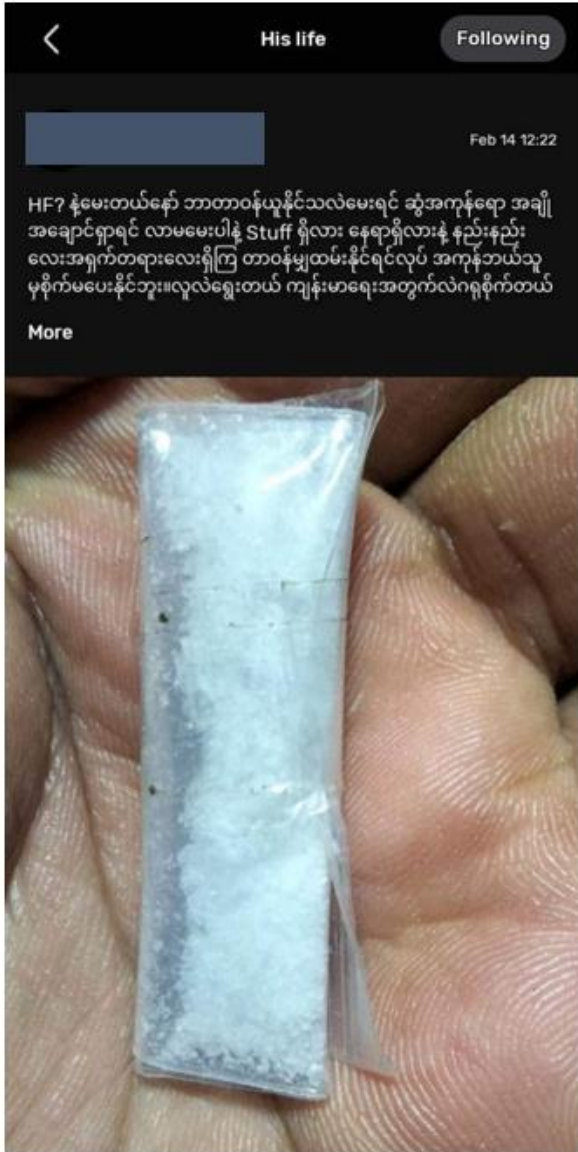
**You are no longer having sex without  
drugs, and you are no longer having  
drugs without sex.**



**[Friday Fever Video Link](#) by Mainline Organization**

# Sexualized drug use issue

- **Complex Issue (more than sex and drug):**
  - intersection of sex, drugs, and gender
  - faces double stigma and often do not disclose their engagement in chemsex
- **Demographics:**
  - common in urban areas, within younger age groups
  - trendy among Young MSM
- **Facilitating factors:**
  - MSM – dating apps
  - SW – client request and higher pay, to accommodate multiple clients, or to engage in sexual activity despite lacking desire
  - PWUD - may unintentionally engage in chemsex while under the influence partly driven by the sexual stimulation induced by the substances



# Sexual health and associated risks

- Studies have shown that MSM who engage in chemsex:
  - are 4 times more likely to be diagnosed with a **sexually transmitted infection**
  - are 5 times more likely to be diagnosed with **HIV**
  - are 9 times more likely to be diagnosed with **hepatitis C**.
- 12.7% of participants from the chemsex group (n = 251) reported having planned for **suicide** at least once in their lifetime.
- 46.6% of chemsex users report **non-consensual acts** during sex, and **violence** during sex was experienced by 16.8%.



Source: Pakianathan M et al. Chemsex and new HIV diagnosis in gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men attending sexual health clinics. *HIV Med* 2018 May 22; [e-pub].

Bohn A, Sander D, Köhler T, Hees N, Oswald F, Scherbaum N, Deimel D and Schecke H (2020) Chemsex and Mental Health of Men Who Have Sex With Men in Germany. *Front. Psychiatry* 11:542301.

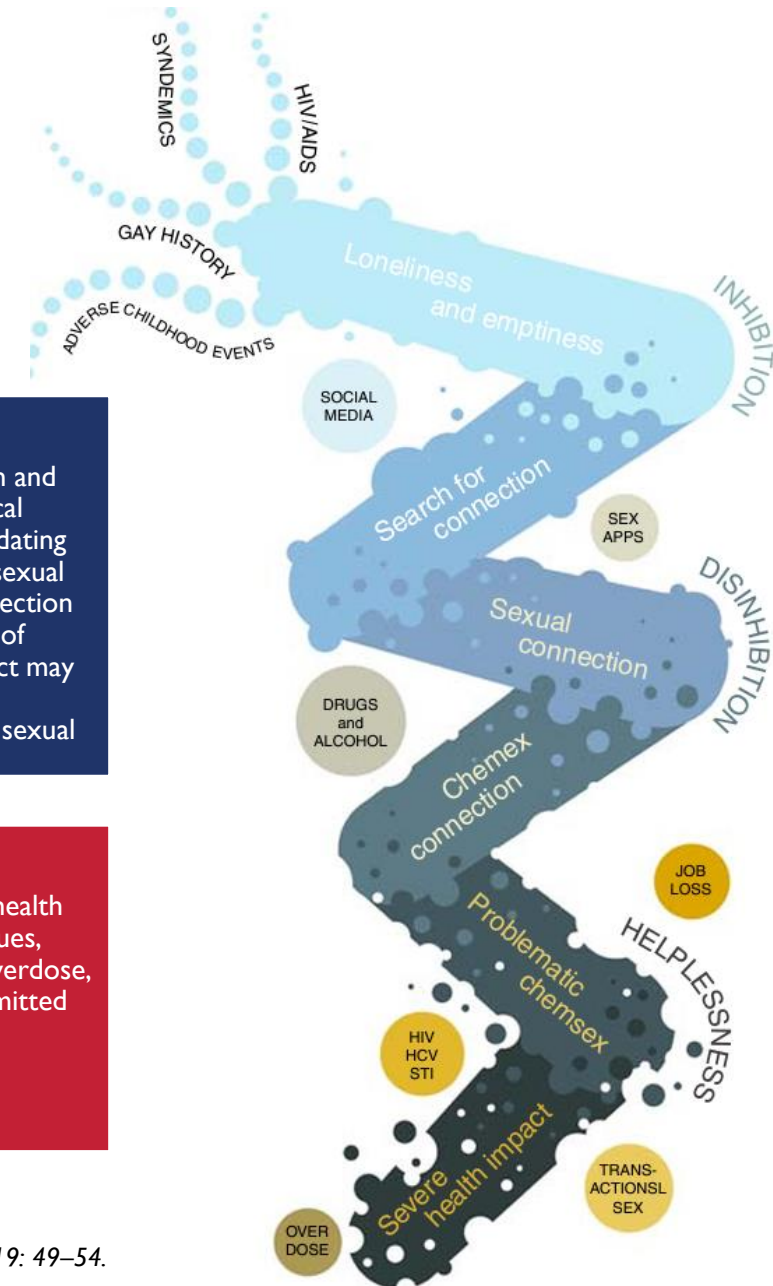
# Problematic chemsex

- Not everyone who uses drugs will try chemsex, and not everyone who has chemsex will experience problems.
- There are different levels of use, from experimenting once to daily drug taking.



# The problematic chemsex journey

Each stage described in the below journey provides the opportunity to intervene and help people step out of the process or develop better harm reduction skills.



## 1. Loneliness and emptiness:

Events and challenges in an individual's past or present may impact their personal and mental health and social relations, leading to emotional vulnerability. Anxieties related to body image and sexual performance can contribute to emotional or sexual inhibition.

## 2. Search for connection:

When people feel lonely and empty, they seek connection with others. This can involve engaging with friends, family, or finding community belonging through social media. Some individuals also seek connection through casual sexual partnerships.

## 3. Sexual connection:

Casual sexual encounters can be fun and satisfying, meeting desires for physical intimacy and self-validation. Online dating websites and mobile apps facilitate sexual connections. However, sexual connection alone may not fully address feelings of loneliness and emptiness. This impact may be intensified when individuals are introduced to substance use during sexual interactions.

## 4. Chemsex connection:

Drug use among gay men individuals is normalized. Via gay dating culture, individuals may rapidly transition to chemsex to enhance sexual pleasure. Chemsex can promise sexual and emotional connection through disinhibition.

## 5. Problematic chemsex:

As chemsex becomes more frequent and intense, it can lead to problematic use. Individuals may prioritize chemsex over other aspects of their work and lives, risking physical and mental health.

## 6. Severe health impact:

Problematic chemsex leads severe health consequences and mental health issues, including substance use disorder, overdose, and increased risk of sexually transmitted infections.

# Education and commodity package

Category	Sub-topics
<b>Drugs and drug use</b>	Drug literacy <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Side effects</li><li>• Drug interactions among people who use multiple drugs</li><li>• Tips for safer drug use</li></ul>
<b>Harm reduction, overdose prevention, and emergency care</b>	Overdose and emergency management/referrals Substance use disorder management
<b>Healthy body and mind</b>	Promoting physical health and self-care. Promoting mental health and linkage to mental health services.
<b>Sex and relationships</b>	Soft skills (negotiation, consent) Sober sex (alternative ways for sexual pleasure without drugs)
<b>Stigma</b>	Self-stigma or stigma from peers/social networks (intracommunity/ intragroup stigma) Societal stigma



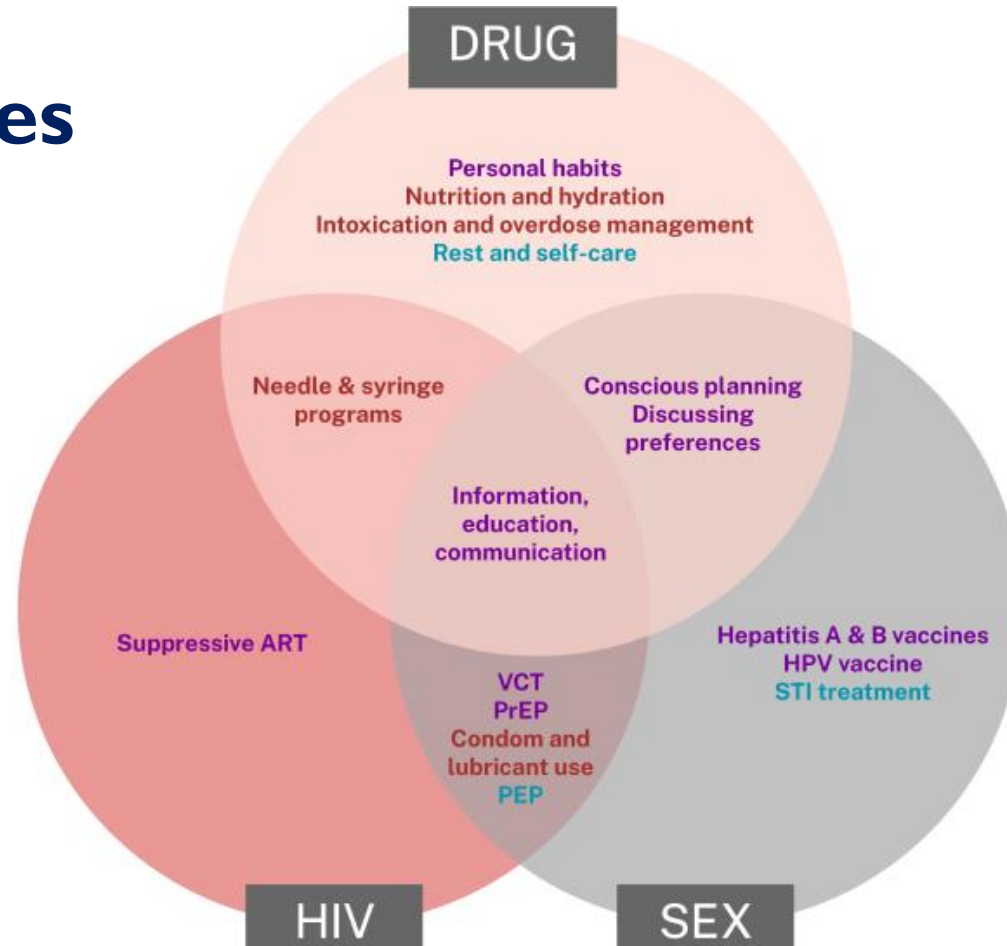
# Education and commodity package

1. 1ml Fixed Needle Syringes\*
2. Safe Loc single sharps box (with instructions)
3. Alcohol Prep Pads
4. Spoons with Filters\*
5. Measuring Syringe (2ml)
6. Contents and 'G' Tracker (A5 folded leaflet)
7. Straws\*
8. Latex Gloves
9. 5ml Skins Aqua Water Based Lubricant sachets
10. Skin Condoms
11. Electrolyte Tablets for salt replacement
12. Mints
13. ID Wrist Bands\*
14. Safer Chemsex (booklet)
15. Health and wellbeing (booklet)
16. Your Rights on Arrest (booklet)
17. Overdoses and Emergency Call
18. Safer Hook-Up (booklet)
19. HIV/ HCV/ STI Risk-O-Meter (flyer)



\* Color-coded to reduce sharing and transmission of blood-borne infections such as HIV and Hepatitis.

# Harm reduction strategies for chemsex

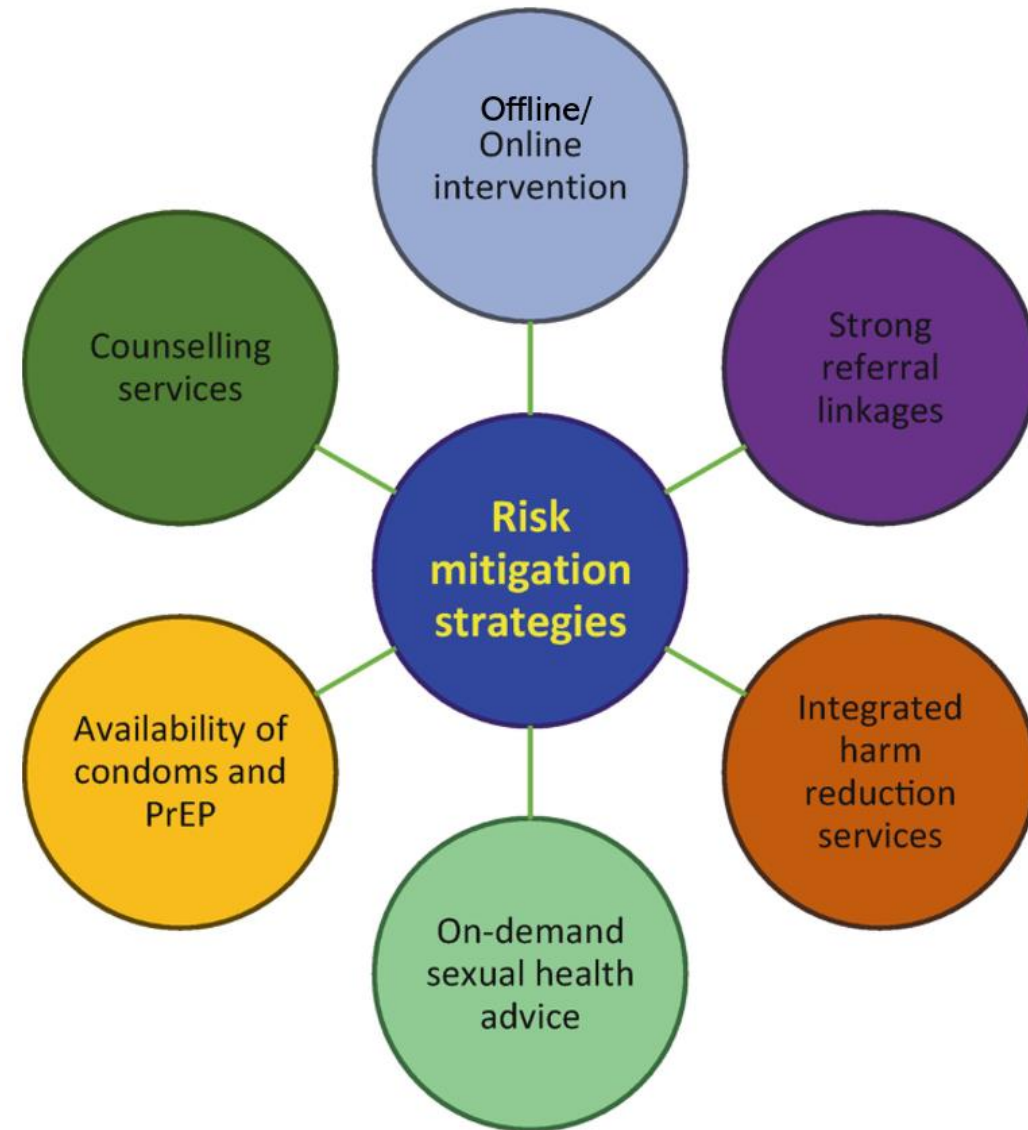


ART=antiretroviral therapy  
 HPV=human papillomavirus  
 VCT=voluntary counseling and testing

Before the chemsex session
  After the chemsex session
  During the chemsex session

# Service approach

- The philosophy of harm reduction is that [not] all individuals are ready, willing, and able to pursue abstinence as a treatment goal.
- The aim is to keep individuals safe while minimizing death, disease, and impact from high-risk behaviours.
- Be able to incorporate the LGBTQI+ affirmative approach into service.
- Counselling for safer sex and harm reduction
- Referral network for services that are outside of the area of harm reduction but very likely to be needed such as violence, mental health, etc.



# Recommendations regarding harm reduction for individuals engaging in chemsex

- Meaningful **involvement of the community** at every stage (e.g. design, implementation, evaluation)
- Investment in and scale up of **community-led harm reduction services** for sexualized drug use
- **Integrated service delivery** covering harm reduction, sexual health, and mental health services with a focus on men who have sex with men
- An **online presence**, as digital technologies have a central role in the chemsex scene
- A **one-stop-shop** for all harm reduction **commodities** (e.g. syringes, pipes, condoms, lubricants, PrEP, PEP)
- Easy access to **HIV, hepatitis B/C, and other STI testing, counseling, and treatment**
- Appropriate knowledge of the **community context and the drugs used** in the local scene
- **Meeting people where they are**, and treating them with respect and dignity



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THANK YOU.