

Washington State Community Drug Checking Network

The **WA State Community Drug Checking Network** (CDCN) is a partnership of organizations around WA State that provide community-level drug checking and related harm reduction services. The network is funded by the Washington State Health Care Authority which has a contract with the Addictions, Drug & Alcohol Institute (ADAI) at the University of Washington. ADAI provides technical assistance, training, and operational support to the network, in collaboration with Public Health – Seattle & King County.

CDCN partners also participate in the international *Alliance for Collaborative Drug Checking*, a learning space with nearly 300 members who provide drug checking services within harm reduction settings and work to advance drug checking policy, best practices, and research.

What is community drug checking?

Community drug checking is an evidence-informed harm reduction intervention in which small samples of drugs or drug residue can be analyzed via multiple technologies to determine the chemical components of the sample. Drug checking is a powerful tool to engage participants, especially when it is provided along with safer use supplies, overdose prevention education, harm reduction services, and referrals or linkages to care. Drug checking can also inform better public health, medical, and treatment responses. Participation in community drug checking is voluntary and anonymous.

Community drug checking programs operate in [several US states](#) as well as across Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. A description of common drug checking programs, fact sheets, and published research can be found here: <https://www.bccsu.ca/drug-checking/>.

[Watch a video](#) about advanced drug checking.

How are drug samples tested?

Community drug checking in WA State works like this:

1. People who use drugs **bring in small amounts of drugs** or residue to be analyzed.
2. Trained drug checking technicians use immunoassay test strips (currently available for fentanyl, benzodiazepines, and xylazine) to **analyze the sample**. A Fourier-transformed infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) machine is often used as well. Detailed protocols guide each step of the testing process. FTIR analysis can only show what substances may be in the sample, such as fentanyl, other drugs, adulterants, and contaminants. Analysis cannot measure how much (i.e., concentration) of each substance is in the sample or detect substances that make up less than ~5% of the sample. Participants receive **preliminary results** within 5-10 minutes. [Not all programs use FTIR]
3. The drug checking technician also **shares harm reduction information and strategies** to help participants take steps to reduce their health and overdose risks. Programs also provide referrals to health care and treatment resources as requested by clients. Drug checking can never determine—and participants are never told—if a drug is “safe” to use or not.



Fourier-transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy machine and immunoassay test strips.

4. Samples are then sent to a laboratory for **secondary testing**. Participants receive a card with a QR code and numerical code linked to their specific secondary test results. The final, secondary results are compiled and reported back to program participants and made available online for the benefit of the wider community.

There are many benefits of community drug checking.

Engages and supports people who use drugs.

- Reaches people who are at risk for overdose and may not be well-served by other community services.
- Gives individuals information about what is in drugs so they can make informed decisions about reducing their health and overdose risks.
- Offers reliable information on safer use, access to harm reduction supplies, and connection with other services.

Enhances public health and safety.

- Increases knowledge of what is in the local drug supply and can identify new trends.
- Helps prevent overdose deaths, adverse reactions, and related incidents.
- Increases effectiveness of community response when new substances emerge.
- Supports health care and treatment providers in making more informed care decisions to successfully engage and care for people who use drugs.

Community drug checking legal protections in Washington State.

Recent amendments to [WA State Law](#) removed drug testing and analyzing equipment from the list of items considered “drug paraphernalia.” These changes also added drug testing equipment to the list of public health supplies allowed to be used and distributed by specified organizations including public health programs, community-based HIV prevention programs, outreach, shelter/housing programs, and pharmacies.

The law also specifically states: *“Public health and syringe service program staff taking samples of substances and using drug testing equipment for the purpose of analyzing the composition of the substances or detecting the presence of certain substances are acting legally and are exempt from arrest and prosecution under RCW 69.50.4011(1) (b) or (c), 37 69.50.4013, 69.50.4014, or 69.41.030(2) (b) or (c).”*

Where to find drug checking results?

Results will be compiled and made available on ADAI’s website. A range of intuitive data displays will address common questions raised by drug checking participants, individuals who use drugs, and community partners around the state. For specific information about a local program’s services and drug checking results, contact that program directly.
