

Drugs and Alcohol: Use and Abuse

Many teens try alcohol, drugs, or both at some time. It's important to talk openly with your child about substance use, including the consequences of breaking rules regarding drugs and alcohol. He or she also needs to know about the serious dangers of substance abuse and addiction. If you have concerns about your child's drug or alcohol use, make sure to discuss them with your doctor.

How do I deal with my child's drug and alcohol use?

Experimenting with drugs or alcohol is very common during adolescence—perhaps even normal. Still, using drugs or alcohol always carries a risk of harm, especially in younger teens and when driving is involved. Driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs is a very serious health risk to both your child and others.

When drug or alcohol use becomes frequent or affects your child's daily functioning, it becomes a problem that needs treatment. Substance abuse is not an isolated problem but is part of larger issues related to your child and family. Your doctor is an important source of information, evaluation, and treatment for problems related to drug and alcohol abuse.

What do drug and alcohol abuse look like?

For most parents, discovering that their child has been using drugs or alcohol comes as an unpleasant surprise. Your child may have behavior changes or a sudden drop in grades at school. Other signs may include:

- Missing school.
- Having a lot of accidents or injuries, especially car accidents.
- Having physical complaints and symptoms with no apparent explanation.

The changes you notice may depend on what substance(s) your child has been using. With all of these substances (except marijuana), overdoses can be fatal.

- *Alcohol.* Your child may seem giddy, groggy, or talkative. Slurred speech and stumbling are common. If he or she becomes very drunk, your child may pass out. Alcohol abuse is still the biggest substance abuse problem.

- *Marijuana.* Your child may act giddy and elated. He or she may seem scattered and have difficulty concentrating and remembering. Appetite is increased and inhibitions are decreased. Your child may seem lazy and uninterested in his or her usual activities, especially with long-term marijuana use.
- *Hallucinogens.* Such drugs include LSD (“acid”), MDMA (“ecstasy” or “X”), and PCP (“angel dust”). These drugs alter perceptions and awareness. Your child may lose his or her sense of reality, seeing or hearing things that aren't there (hallucinations). Some types of hallucinogenic drugs may cause seizures or stroke.
- *Cocaine.* Cocaine may be sniffed or smoked (“crack”). Your child may seem giddy and overactive. Widened pupils and fast heartbeat are common. Seizures, bleeding in the brain, heart attack, and other serious medical complications may develop.
- *Amphetamines.* Amphetamines are also known as methamphetamine or “speed.” Your child may seem agitated, overexcited, restless, or talkative. As the drug wears off, he or she may “crash,” suddenly becoming depressed. With long-term use, personality changes, weight loss, and medical complications may occur. Medical risks include convulsions/seizures and abnormal heart rhythms.
- *Opiates.* For example heroin, which may be sniffed, injected, or taken in other ways. It causes an intense “high” at first, then grogginess and sleepiness. Heroin is highly addictive; addicts who cannot get the drug experience intense withdrawal symptoms. Medical complications are common, including coma and apnea (not breathing).
- *“Date rape” drugs.* Drugs such as Rohypnol or GHB may be given to an unsuspecting person as part of a sexual assault. The victim may not remember anything about the attack afterward. Alcohol may also act as a “date rape” drug.

What increases the risk of drug and alcohol abuse?

- A number of factors are involved in the development of abuse. Genetic factors may play a role; for example, alcoholism runs in families. Other contributors may include family problems and other stressors, depression, the availability of drugs, and peer pressure.
- Certain other conditions are linked to substance abuse, including conduct disorder, attention deficit–hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and personality disorders. Children

who start using drugs in their early teen years may be more likely to have substance abuse problems in adulthood.

What are some possible complications of drug and alcohol abuse?

There are too many complications to list. Drug and alcohol abuse cause serious health, family, and social problems. Consequences range from difficulties in home and work life, to legal problems, to life-threatening medical complications.

Can drug and alcohol abuse be prevented?

- To reduce your child's chances of developing a substance abuse problem, provide a supportive environment that allows your child to build positive life attitudes, behaviors, and relationships.
- Talk openly with children about drugs and alcohol, even before the teen years. Encourage healthy after-school activities, such as sports.
- In a way that is appropriate for your children's ages, keep an eye on their activities: who their friends are, where they go after school, what time they get home at night. Even for older teens, parents need to set rules for expected behavior and enforce consequences for rule breaking.
- Talk to your child about the dangers of alcohol and driving. Make sure he or she knows never to get in a car with anyone who has been drinking or is on drugs. Establish a rule that he or she can call you for a ride at any time, with "few questions asked."

What should I do about my child's drug or alcohol use?

- If you have concerns about substance abuse by your child or adolescent, make sure to mention them to your doctor. He or she can talk to you and your child and assess the severity of the drug or alcohol use. This may include blood or urine tests for drugs or alcohol. For older teens, drug testing without the patient's permission is generally not recommended, except in certain situations (for example, repeated injuries or accidents).

- The way to deal with drug or alcohol use depends on many factors, including the age of the child, his or her situation at home or at school, what substances are being used, and how often.
- The severity of the drug or alcohol abuse is the main factor to consider in treatment. We may recommend a treatment program for substance abusers or referral to a specialized counselor. These programs can fully assess your child and recommend the most appropriate level and intensity of treatment.
- Treatment may start with a brief intervention, offering information and advice to your teen about the need to make good decisions about drugs and alcohol. This is most appropriate if substance abuse is a new or short-term problem.
- Teens with more severe problems may need more intensive treatment. A stay in the hospital or other special treatment center may be needed for "detoxification." This is especially important if substance abuse has caused medical or psychological problems.
- Patients with serious substance abuse often need long-term rehabilitation. This includes medical follow-up as well as psychosocial support to deal with drug or alcohol dependence and related issues. Family therapy or group therapy—sometimes including other teens with substance abuse problems—can be helpful.
- After treatment, there is always the danger of a relapse. Follow-up with a professional or with a "help" group such as Alcoholics Anonymous is invaluable for helping substance abusers to stay sober over the long term.

When should I call your office?

- Call our office if you have any concerns related to drug or alcohol use by your teenager or younger child. Recognizing and dealing with the problem as early as possible can help to minimize the damaging effects on your child's life.
- After your child has had treatment for substance abuse, call our office if he or she shows any signs of using drugs or alcohol again (relapse).
- If your child shows signs of serious drug or alcohol intoxication or medical complications (such as unconsciousness, seizures, difficulty breathing, and so forth) seek medical care immediately. *This is a potential emergency.* 