

Drug information for parents



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You can make a difference

Whether your child chooses to use drugs or not, he or she could be aware of the issue of drugs through the media or peers. You can support your child by talking with them about drugs and by finding out how he or she is coping with the pressures of life. This pamphlet is designed to help you talk with your child more confidently about drugs. It provides you with accurate information and answers to questions asked by many parents. It is based on a harm minimisation philosophy.

What is a drug?

A drug is any substance, except food and water, which when taken into the body changes the way the mind and/or body functions.



Therefore medicines, caffeine, tobacco, inhalants, alcohol, cannabis, heroin and steroids are all drugs.

Main drug groups and their effects

Drugs are often grouped according to their effect on the central nervous system. There are three main groups:

- depressants
- stimulants
- hallucinogens.

The legal status of drugs depends on certain factors. For example, alcohol is a legal drug, but under most circumstances it is illegal for people under the age of eighteen to purchase it.

Depressants

This term does not mean that a person will feel depressed or sad after taking a drug. Depressant drugs slow down the central nervous system and the messages being sent to and from the brain. The heart rate and breathing also slow down.

Depressants include:

Legal: alcohol, minor tranquillisers, inhalants (glue, petrol and spray paint), codeine such as Panadeine, opiates such as methadone.



Illegal: cannabis (marijuana, hashish, hashish oil), opiates such as heroin.

Mild effects can be:

- feeling relaxed
- a sense of calm and wellbeing
- a sense of euphoria
- feeling more courageous.

Stronger effects can be:

- slurred speech
- uncoordinated movement
- vomiting and nausea
- unconsciousness caused by breathing and heart rate slowing down
- in extreme cases, death.

Depressants affect concentration and coordination and may slow down the ability to respond to unexpected situations. These effects make driving dangerous. When one depressant is taken with another depressant,

for example alcohol and cannabis, the effects can be intensified in unpredictable ways.

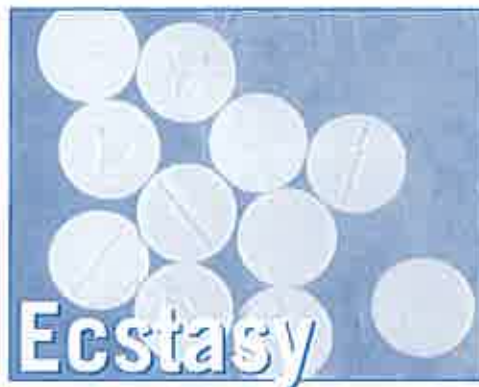
Cannabis has a higher tar content than tobacco. Continued use can cause bronchitis, mouth, throat and lung cancer, and other smoking-related diseases. Cannabis can affect a person's short-term memory and logical thinking.

Heroin is an opiate. Opiates are strong painkillers and powerful depressants.

Heroin sold on the street is often not pure. Complications and serious side effects can result from the inconsistent purity of the heroin. Sharing needles, syringes and injecting equipment carries the risk of HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis C and B, and other infections.

Stimulants

Stimulants speed up the central nervous system and the messages going to and from the brain. They increase the heart rate, body temperature and blood pressure.



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Stimulants include:

Legal: nicotine (cigarettes), caffeine (coffee, cola, chocolate, slimming tablets, some 'energy drinks'), pseudoephedrine (found in some cough and cold medicine).

Illegal: cocaine, non-prescription amphetamines, speed, LSD and ecstasy.

Mild effects can be:

- thirstiness
- loss of appetite
- inability to sleep
- dilated pupils
- talkativeness
- restlessness.

Stronger effects can be:

- anxiety
- panic
- seizures
- headaches and stomach cramps
- aggression
- paranoia
- mental confusion
- unconsciousness.

Users of stimulants can be physically run down because of lack of sleep and food.

Hallucinogens

Hallucinogens affect perception. People who have taken them may see or hear things in a distorted way. The senses become confused, especially time, sound and colour. The effects of hallucinogens vary greatly and are not easy to predict.

Hallucinogens include:

Illegal: LSD, magic mushrooms, mescaline, ecstasy and marijuana (in strong doses).

Some effects can be:

- chills and hot flushes
- dilation of pupils
- loss of appetite, stomach cramps or nausea
- increased activity, talking and laughing
- panic and feelings of persecution (paranoia)
- long-term flash backs.



How do drugs affect people?

The effects of a drug will vary from person to person and depend on:

- **the individual:** their mood, size, weight, gender, personality, health, when they last ate, expectations of the drug and their previous drug experiences.
- **the drug:** the amount used, the strength, how it is used (smoked, eaten, injected) and whether the person has taken other drugs at the same time.
- **the environment:** whether the person is with trusted friends, alone, in a social setting or at home.

What harms are associated with drug use?

Possible harms include:

- harms to the body
- harms to relationships with others: friends, family, community
- harms to lifestyle: employment, education, accommodation
- harms associated with breaking the law.

Intoxication can cause impaired judgment and people may take risks they normally wouldn't take, such as diving into a pool that is too shallow. Many young people experiment with drugs. It is important that

they are equipped to keep themselves as safe as possible.

While young people may choose not to use drugs, they may still be affected by the drug use of others. A common risk is getting into the car with someone who has been drinking alcohol.

Some drugs, especially medicines, are necessary or have benefits to health. Harm can occur if these are shared.

Why do young people use drugs?

Young people use drugs for the same reasons that adults give for using drugs. These include to:

- have fun
- escape from and forget their problems
- gain confidence and courage
- remove personal responsibility for decisions
- socialise
- celebrate
- experiment
- relieve boredom
- relax and relieve stress
- relieve pain.

Experimentation and taking risks are part of growing up and part of life for most people. Parents' own drug use has a major influence on their children's drug use.

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How can I tell if my child is using drugs?

It is very difficult to tell if your child is using drugs. The effects of drugs vary greatly from person to person. There are no physical or emotional changes that are specific to drug use only, but if your child is behaving in an unusual way over a long period of time there may be an issue. Remember that all of these changes can just be part of growing up. Be careful to talk with your child before jumping to conclusions about possible drug use.

Some warning signs include:

- lethargy
- changes to eating patterns
- extreme mood swings and explosive outbursts
- staying out all night
- drop in school grades
- trouble at school
- sudden and frequent changes of friends
- an unexplained need for money
- having lots of money
- valuable items missing
- trouble with the police.

What should I do if I find out my child is using drugs?

Remember that your primary consideration is your child's safety and the safety of others.

Don't panic: Overreacting will make your child less willing to talk to you and tell you exactly what has happened. Talk calmly to your child and find out what is happening.

Get the facts: Talk to your child and find out which drug is being taken and how often. Your child may have been experimenting with the drug and has since stopped using it.

Show your concern: Make it clear that you love your child but that you do not like him or her taking drugs.

Choose your moment: If you try to discuss your child's drug use with them when they are intoxicated or under the influence of the drug, or you are angry, it is likely that the discussion will turn into an argument. Wait until they are no longer under the influence of the drug and you feel calmer.

Recognise problems: If your child is regularly using a drug to satisfy a need or to solve a problem, then they need help and support. Do not be afraid to get professional help.

Don't blame yourself: If your child is using drugs it does not mean that you have failed as a parent. Many young people go through difficult times or experiment with drugs no matter how caring or supportive their parents are towards them.

How can I influence my child's decisions about drugs?

Experimenting is a natural part of growing up. Many teenagers experiment with alcohol and tobacco. Some will experiment with illegal drugs also, such as marijuana.

There are some things that parents can do to reduce the likelihood of their children coming to harm from drugs.

Provide a good role model: Children of parents who smoke and drink are more likely to smoke and drink themselves. Consider your own use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs and the message this might give your child. Discuss your own and others' drug use in a way that encourages your child to explore and clarify their attitudes and values.

Be informed: Be prepared to discuss drug issues openly and honestly. If you do not know the answer to a question be prepared to seek further information to be able to provide an answer. This could be something that you and your child could do together. If you tell exaggerated stories about the dangers of drug use to try to scare your child away from drugs they may not listen to what you have to say.

Talk and listen: Be prepared to listen to the problems and concerns your child may have. Overreacting or trivialising your child's

concerns may make them unwilling to talk to you. Communicating with your child is a two-way process.

It is important to be able to talk to your children about everyday issues. Parents who do not discuss things such as music, school or sport with their children may find it difficult to discuss an emotive issue like drug use with them.

Set ground rules: Plan ahead for potentially difficult situations. It is useful to establish rules about acceptable behaviour in relation to alcohol and other drug use.

Allow your child to participate in making the rules. This gives them more responsibility for adhering to these rules. Teaching young people to negotiate can help to end unresolved arguments and support positive conflict resolution.

Get to know your child's friends and their parents: Other parents can provide a great source of support and encouragement.

Look for alternatives to drug use: Parents can encourage their children to use other ways to relax or deal with difficulties.

Note: Information contained in this pamphlet is offered for general purposes and should not be considered a substitute for specific, professional advice.

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