

How Can I Tell If a Friend or a Loved One Has a Problem With Alcohol, Marijuana, or Other Illicit Drugs?

Sometimes it is tough to tell. Most people won't walk up to someone they're close to and ask for help. In fact, they will probably do everything possible to deny or hide the problem. But, there are certain warning signs that may indicate that a family member or friend is using drugs and drinking too much alcohol.

If your friend or loved one has one or more of the following signs, he or she may have a problem with drugs or alcohol:

- getting high on drugs or getting drunk on a regular basis
- lying about things, or the amount of drugs or alcohol they are using
- avoiding you and others in order to get high or drunk
- giving up activities they used to do such as sports, homework, or hanging out with friends who don't use drugs or drink
- having to use more marijuana or other illicit drugs to get the same effects
- constantly talking about using drugs or drinking
- believing that in order to have fun they need to drink or use marijuana or other drugs
- pressuring others to use drugs or drink
- getting into trouble with the law
- taking risks, including sexual risks and driving under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs
- feeling run-down, hopeless, depressed, or even suicidal
- suspension from school for an alcohol- or drug-related incident
- missing work or poor work performance because of drinking or drug use

Many of the signs, such as sudden changes in mood, difficulty in getting along with others, poor job or school performance, irritability, and depression, might be explained by other causes. Unless you observe drug use or excessive drinking, it can be hard to determine the cause of these problems. Your first step is to contact a qualified alcohol and drug professional in your area who can give you further advice.

How Can I Get Help?

You can get help for yourself or for a friend or loved one from numerous national, State, and local organizations, treatment centers, referral centers, and hotlines throughout the country. There are various kinds of treatment services and centers. For example, some may involve outpatient counseling, while others may be 3- to 5-week-long in-patient programs.

While you or your friend or loved one may be hesitant to seek help, know that treatment programs offer organized and structured services with individual, group, and family therapy for people with alcohol and drug abuse problems. Research shows that when appropriate treatment is

given, and when clients follow their prescribed program, treatment can work. By reducing alcohol and/or drug abuse, treatment reduces costs to society in terms of medical care, law enforcement, and crime. More importantly, treatment can help keep you and your loved ones together.

Remember, some people may go through treatment a number of times before they are in full recovery. Do not give up hope.

Each community has its own resources. Some common referral sources that are often listed in the phone book are:

- Community Drug Hotlines
- Local Emergency Health Clinics, or Community Treatment Services
- City/Local Health Departments
- Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, or Al-Anon/Alateen
- Hospitals

Cocaine and Crack Cocaine

Cocaine is a white powder that comes from the leaves of the South American coca plant. Cocaine is either "snorted" through the nasal passages or injected intravenously. Cocaine belongs to a class of drugs known as stimulants, which tend to give a temporary illusion of limitless power and energy that leave the user feeling depressed, edgy, and craving more. Crack is a smokable form of cocaine that has been chemically altered. Cocaine and crack are highly addictive. This addiction can erode physical and mental health and can become so strong that these drugs dominate all aspects of an addict's life.

Physical risks associated with using any amount of cocaine and crack:

- increases in blood pressure, heart rate, breathing rate, and body temperature
- heart attacks, strokes, and respiratory failure
- hepatitis or AIDS through shared needles
- brain seizures
- reduction of the body's ability to resist and combat infection

Psychological risks:

- violent, erratic, or paranoid behavior
- hallucinations and "coke bugs"--a sensation of imaginary insects crawling over the skin
- confusion, anxiety and depression, loss of interest in food or sex
- "cocaine psychosis"--losing touch with reality, loss of interest in friends, family, sports, hobbies, and other activities

Some users spend hundreds or thousands of dollars on cocaine and crack each week and will do anything to support their habit. Many turn to drug selling, prostitution, or other crimes.

Cocaine and crack use has been a contributing factor in a number of drownings, car crashes, falls, burns, and suicides.

Even first time users may experience seizures or heart attacks, which can be fatal.

Hallucinogens

Hallucinogenic drugs are substances that distort the perception of objective reality. The most well-known hallucinogens include phencyclidine, otherwise known as PCP, angel dust, or loveboat; lysergic acid diethylamide, commonly known as LSD or acid; mescaline and peyote; and psilocybin, or "magic" mushrooms. Under the influence of hallucinogens, the senses of direction, distance, and time become disoriented. These drugs can produce unpredictable, erratic, and violent behavior in users that sometimes leads to serious injuries and death. The effect of hallucinogens can last for 12 hours.

LSD produces tolerance, so that users who take the drug repeatedly must take higher and higher doses in order to achieve the same state of intoxication. This is extremely dangerous, given the unpredictability of the drug, and can result in increased risk of convulsions, coma, heart and lung failure, and even death.

Physical risks associated with using hallucinogens:

- increased heart rate and blood pressure
- sleeplessness and tremors
- lack of muscular coordination
- sparse, mangled, and incoherent speech
- decreased awareness of touch and pain that can result in self-inflicted injuries
- convulsions
- coma; heart and lung failure

Psychological risks associated with using hallucinogens:

- a sense of distance and estrangement
- depression, anxiety, and paranoia
- violent behavior
- confusion, suspicion, and loss of control
- flashbacks
- behavior similar to schizophrenic psychosis
- catatonic syndrome whereby the user becomes mute, lethargic, disoriented, and makes meaningless repetitive movements

Everyone reacts differently to hallucinogens--there's no way to predict if you can avoid a "bad trip."

Inhalant Abuse

It can kill suddenly, and it can kill those who sniff for the first time. Every year, young people in this country die of inhalant abuse. Hundreds suffer severe consequences, including permanent brain damage, loss of muscle control, and destruction of the heart, blood, kidney, liver, and bone marrow.

Today more than 1,000 different products are commonly abused. The National Institute on Drug Abuse reported in 1996 that one in five American teenagers has used inhalants to get high. Many youngsters say they begin sniffing when they're in grade school. They start because they feel these substances can't hurt them, because of peer pressure, or because of low self-esteem. Once hooked, these victims find it a tough habit to break. Inhalant abuse is the deliberate inhalant or sniffing of common products found in homes and schools to obtain a "high." Sniffing can cause sickness and death. For example, victims may become nauseated, forgetful, and unable to see things clearly. Victims may lose control of their body, including the use of arms and legs. These effects can last 15 to 45 minutes after sniffing. In addition, sniffing can severely damage many parts of the body, including the brain, heart, liver, and kidneys. Even worse, victims can die suddenly -- without any warning. "Sudden Sniffing Death" can occur during or right after sniffing. The heart begins to overwork, beating rapidly but unevenly, which can lead to cardiac arrest. Even first-time abusers have been known to die from sniffing inhalants.

Ordinary household products, which can be safely used for legitimate purposes, can be problematic in the hands of an inhalant abuser. The following categories of products are reportedly abused: glues/adhesives, nail polish remover, marking pens, paint thinner, spray paint, butane lighter fluid, gasoline, propane gas, typewriter correction fluid, household cleaners, cooking sprays, deodorants, fabric protectors, whipping cream aerosols, and air conditioning coolants.

If someone is an inhalant abuser, some or all these symptoms may be evident:

- Unusual breath odor or chemical odor on clothing.
- Slurred or disoriented speech.
- Drunk, dazed, or dizzy appearance.
- Signs of paint or other products where they wouldn't normally be, such as on the face or fingers.
- Red or runny eyes or nose.
- Spots and/or sores around the mouth.
- Nausea and/or loss of appetite.
- Chronic inhalant abusers may exhibit such symptoms as anxiety, excitability, irritability, or restlessness.

Inhalant abusers also may exhibit the following signs:

- Sitting with a pen or marker near nose.
- Constantly smelling clothing sleeves.
- Showing paint or stain marks on the face, fingers, or clothing.

- Hiding rags, clothes, or empty containers of the potentially abused products in closets and other places.

There is no typical profile of an inhalant abuser. Victims are represented by both sexes and all socioeconomic groups throughout the U.S. It's not unusual to see elementary and middle school age youths involved with inhalant abuse.

One of the most important steps you can take is to talk with your children or other youngsters about not experimenting even a first time with inhalants. In addition, talk with your children's teachers, guidance counselors, and coaches. By discussing this problem openly and stressing the devastating consequences of inhalant abuse, you can help prevent a tragedy.

Be alert for symptoms of inhalant abuse. If you suspect there's a problem, you should consider seeking professional help. Contact a local drug rehabilitation center or other services available in your community, or: National Inhalant Prevention Coalition 1-800-269-4237.

Marijuana

Marijuana is the most widely used illicit drug in the United States and tends to be the first illegal drug teens use.

The physical effects of marijuana use, particularly on developing adolescents, can be acute.

Short-term effects of using marijuana:

- Sleepiness
- difficulty keeping track of time, impaired or reduced short-term memory
- reduced ability to perform tasks requiring concentration and coordination, such as driving a car
- increased heart rate
- potential cardiac dangers for those with preexisting heart disease
- bloodshot eyes
- dry mouth and throat
- decreased social inhibitions
- paranoia, hallucinations

Long-term effects of using marijuana:

- enhanced cancer risk
- decrease in testosterone levels for men; also lower sperm counts and difficulty having children
- increase in testosterone levels for women; also increased risk of infertility
- diminished or extinguished sexual pleasure
- psychological dependence requiring more of the drug to get the same effect.

Marijuana blocks the messages going to your brain and alters your perceptions and emotions, vision, hearing, and coordination.

A recent study of 1,023 trauma patients admitted to a shock trauma unit found that one-third had marijuana in their blood.

Methamphetamine

Methamphetamine is a stimulant drug chemically related to amphetamine but with stronger effects on the central nervous system. Street names for the drug include "speed," "meth," and "crank."

Methamphetamine is used in pill form, or in powdered form by snorting or injecting. Crystallized methamphetamine known as "ice," "crystal," or "glass," is a smokable and more powerful form of the drug.

The effects of methamphetamine use include:

- increased heart rate and blood pressure
- increased wakefulness; insomnia
- increased physical activity
- decreased appetite
- respiratory problems
- extreme anorexia
- hypothermia, convulsions, and cardiovascular problems, which can lead to death
- euphoria
- irritability, confusion, tremors
- anxiety, paranoia, or violent behavior
- can cause irreversible damage to blood vessels in the brain, producing strokes

Methamphetamine users who inject the drug and share needles are at risk for acquiring HIV/AIDS.

Methamphetamine is an increasingly popular drug at raves (all night dancing parties), and as part of a number of drugs used by college-aged students. Marijuana and alcohol are commonly listed as additional drugs of abuse among methamphetamine treatment admissions. Most of the methamphetamine-related deaths (92%) reported in 1994 involved methamphetamine in combination with at least one other drug, most often alcohol (30%), heroin (23%), or cocaine (21%). Researchers continue to study the long-term effects of methamphetamine use.

Messages for Teenagers

- Know the law. Methamphetamines, marijuana, hallucinogens, crack, cocaine, and many other substances are illegal. Depending on where you are caught, you could face high fines and jail time. Alcohol is illegal to buy or possess if you are under 21.
- Be aware of the risks. Drinking or using drugs increases the risk of injury. Car crashes, falls, burns, drowning, and suicide are all linked to drug use.
- Keep your edge. Drug use can ruin your looks, make you depressed, and contribute to slipping grades.
- Play it safe. One incident of drug use could make you do something that you will regret for a lifetime.
- Do the smart thing. Using drugs puts your health, education, family ties, and social life at risk.
- Get with the program. Doing drugs isn't "in" anymore.
- Think twice about what you're advertising when you buy and wear T-shirts, hats, pins, or jewelry with a pot leaf, joint, blunt, beer can, or other drug paraphernalia on them. Do you want to promote something that can cause cancer? make you forget things? or make it difficult to drive a car?
- Face your problems. Using drugs won't help you escape your problems, it will only create more.
- Be a real friend. If you know someone with a drug problem, be part of the solution. Urge your friend to get help.
- Remember, you DON'T NEED drugs or alcohol. If you think "everybody's doing it," you're wrong! Over 86% of 12-17 year-olds have never tried marijuana; over 98% have never used cocaine; only about half a percent of them have ever used crack. Doing drugs won't make you happy or popular or help you to learn the skills you need as you grow up. In fact, doing drugs can cause you to fail at all of these things.