



SUBSTANCE ABUSE: A FACT SHEET FOR PARENTS

What is meant by substance abuse?

- Use of any illegal drug, such as cocaine, marijuana, or heroin
- Any use of alcohol or tobacco (see the “Tobacco Use” and “Alcohol Use” fact sheets) that causes risk to health
- Use of a plant part to get “high” (eg, jimson weed seeds and mushrooms)
- Use of an inhaled chemical to get high (eg, gasoline, paint thinner, and glue)
- Use of steroids or other performance-enhancing drugs
- Any use of a prescription drug not prescribed for the adolescent (eg, narcotics)
- Misuse of a prescribed drug (eg, wrong amount and wrong reasons for using)

How common is substance abuse among adolescent girls?

- 48% of 12th graders and 13% of 9th graders have used marijuana.
- 10% of 12th graders and 17% of 9th graders have used an inhalant.
- 4% of 12th graders and 5% of 11th graders have used amphetamines.
- 8% of 12th graders and 5% of 9th graders have used cocaine.
- 7% of 12th graders and 6% of 10th graders have used hallucinogens.
- 5% of girls say they have tried marijuana before age 13 years.

Which adolescent girls are most likely to use illegal substances?

- Many young people may try an illegal substance once, especially under peer pressure, but do not continue use.
- Young people give many different reasons for using substances.
 - To satisfy curiosity
 - To feel good—“get high”
 - To express independence
 - To fit in with a group socially
 - To deal with stress, depression, or boredom
 - To escape from a difficult situation
- Young people who use alcohol or tobacco regularly are more likely to try illegal drugs than those who do not use alcohol or tobacco.

Parents can and should model responsible use of prescription and nonprescription medications (take only when needed, only as directed, and only as long as needed). It also is important for parents to be responsible and set an example if alcohol is used in front of teens.

Which adolescent girls are at greatest risk of substance abuse?

- Those whose parents have substance abuse problems
- Those whose friends use illegal substances
- Those who use tobacco or alcohol regularly
- Those who have family problems
- Those who have a history of depression or other mental illness
- Those who have poor academic performance
- Those who have other behavior problems
- Those with a history of physical or sexual abuse
- Those who are concerned about weight

What are the short-term risks of substance abuse?

- Decreased judgment and ability to make good decisions (any substance)
- Poor coordination (any substance)
- Sleepiness that prevents normal alertness (sedatives, narcotics, and alcohol)
- Overdose of the substance, leading to vomiting, passing out, seizures, and even sudden death
- Rapid heart rate and abnormal heart beat (amphetamines and inhalants)
- Sudden high blood pressure, even strokes (amphetamines and cocaine)
- Shortness of breath and wheezing (marijuana and anything smoked)
- Suffocation from inhaling substances in plastic bags (glue)
- Infections from injecting drugs—skin infections and blood-stream infections
- Hepatitis B or hepatitis C infection or human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection from sharing needles (narcotics and stimulants)
- Being raped while under the influence (“date rape drugs”)
- Violent behavior (amphetamines and inhalants)
- Driving after using any substance increases the chance of a crash, injuries, and even death
- Breaking the law—using, buying, and selling any illegal drug can lead to arrest and detention
- Adults who provide illegal drugs to minors (or anyone else) are breaking the law.

What are the risks of long-term abuse of substances?

- Valuing drugs or getting high over friends, family, school, or jobs





- Poor concentration and memory, leading to poor performance in school, sports, and jobs
 - Poor nutrition and extreme weight loss
 - Loss of hair and yellow or grey skin
 - Depression and risk for suicidal attempts
 - Hallucinations—seeing or hearing things that are not there
 - Flashbacks that can be frightening or distracting (hallucinogens)
 - Lung and heart disease if the substance is smoked (marijuana and nicotine)
 - Damage to the inside of the nose (anything snorted, such as cocaine)
 - Permanent damage to liver, kidneys, and bone marrow (inhalants)
 - Constipation (narcotics)
 - Addiction or dependence (narcotics, cocaine, and nicotine)
- Problems with the law—suspicion of possessing, purchasing, or distributing drugs
 - Any evidence or even suspicion of substance abuse deserves serious attention.

Should you have your teen tested for substance abuse?

- Many substances cannot be tested for unless the person has used them in a sufficient quantity within a certain period, often 2–3 days.
- A negative test result can provide false security and support the teen's denial of use.
- In most instances, adolescents can only be tested for drugs with their permission.
- The results of drug testing cannot be shared without the adolescent's consent.
- The results of a drug test provide no information about the extent of use in the past or the chance of continued use.
- Forcing or tricking an adolescent to having a drug test often backfires—she no longer will confide in or cooperate with her physician or parent.

What can you do if you suspect your teen has a substance abuse problem?

- Get the support of someone you trust (eg, family, friends, a school counselor, or a religious or spiritual leader)
- Consult a health or mental health professional for advice.
- Find out where she is going and try to keep her away from parties and places where illegal drugs may be used.
- Do not let her drive if there is any chance she will drive while intoxicated.
- Remove or lock up any prescription or nonprescription drugs that may be abused.
- Join a support group for parents or encourage your teen join one, such as Al-Anon/Alateen or Narcotics Anonymous
- Contact the organizations listed in this fact sheet for more information.

For More Information

We have provided information on the following organizations and web sites because they have information that may be of interest to our readers. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) does not necessarily endorse the views expressed or the facts presented by these organizations or their web sites. Further, ACOG does not endorse any commercial products that may be advertised or available from these organizations or on these web sites.

Al-Anon/Alateen Family Group Headquarters

Telephone: (888) 4AL-ANON (425-2666)

Web: www.al-anon.alateen.org

Alcoholics Anonymous

Telephone: (212) 870-3400

Web: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org

American Academy of Family Physicians

Telephone: (913) 906-6000 or (800) 274-2237

Web: www.aafp.org

American Academy of Pediatrics

Telephone: (847) 434-4000

Web: www.aap.org

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

Telephone: (202) 638-5577 or (800) 673-8444

Web: www.acog.org

Drug Strategies

Telephone: (202) 289-9070

Web: www.drugstrategies.org

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information

Telephone: (800) 729-6686

Web: <http://ncadi.samhsa.gov>

National Institute on Drug Abuse

Telephone: (301) 443-1124

Web: www.nida.nih.gov

National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign

Office of National Drug Control Policy

Telephone: (800) 666-3332

Web: www.mediacampaign.org

Narcotics Anonymous

Telephone: (818) 773-9999

Web: www.na.org/

Partnership for a Drug Free America

Telephone: (212) 922-1560

Web: www.drugfree.org

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Telephone: (877) SAMHSA-7 (726-4727)

Web: www.samhsa.gov

What are the signs that your teen may have a substance abuse problem?

- Frequent physical symptoms not otherwise explained
- Loss of control over emotions (eg, outbursts of anger, crying, and anxiety)
- Paranoid behavior
- Unexplained cuts, bruises, burns, and skin marks
- Trouble in relationships with family members and others
- Worsening school or job performance
- Dropping out of extra-curricular activities
- Secretive behavior—decrease in communication with parents
- Change in friends to those who use alcohol or illegal drugs
- Less attention or lack of concern about appearance and personal hygiene (not always a sign)
- Tattooing and body piercing without your consent (not always a sign)
- Discovery of drug paraphernalia (smoking, injecting, and snorting devices)
- Excess use of eyedrops, incense, and room fresheners
- Loss or appearance of money, expensive clothing, electronic equipment, or other items.