Substance Abuse

What is meant by substance abuse?

- Any use of an 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
- Any use of a plant part to get "high" (eg, jimson weed seeds and mushrooms)
- Any use of an inhaled chemical to get high (eg, gasoline, paint thinner, and glue)
- Any use of a prescription drug not prescribed for you
- Misuse of a drug prescribed for you (eg, wrong amount and wrong reasons for using)

Who abuses substances?

- Most people do not use illegal substances.
- Some people become dependent on medicines prescribed for them.
- Teens 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
- Teens who use alcohol or tobacco regularly are more likely to try illegal drugs than those who do not use alcohol or tobacco.

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 (anything smoked)
- Suffocation from inhaling substances in plastic bags (glue)
- Infections from injecting drugs—skin infections, 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 and alcohol)
- 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.

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, jobs
- Poor nutrition and extreme weight loss
- Loss of hair and yellow or grey skin
- Depression
- Hallucinations—seeing or hearing things that are not there
- Flashbacks that can be frightening or distracting
- 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 and alcohol)
- Constipation (narcotics)
- Addiction and dependence (narcotics, cocaine, nicotine, and alcohol)

What are the risks of using substances while pregnant?

- The baby may be born early.
- The baby may be born with low birth weight.
- The baby may be addicted and have withdrawal symptoms from the drugs after birth.
- The baby may be born with mental retardation or other birth defects.

How do you know if you have a drug abuse problem?

- You should seek help if you answer yes to one or more of the following questions:
  - — Have you ever ridden in a car driven by someone, including yourself, who was "high" on drugs?
  - — Do you ever use drugs to relax or feel better about yourself?
  - — Do you use drugs while alone?
  - — Do you forget what you were doing while you were "high"?
  - — Do your friends or family ever tell you to stop using drugs?
  - — Have you ever been in trouble because of using drugs?

What you can do if you have a drug problem

- Get the support of someone you trust (family, friends, a school counselor, or a religious or spiritual leader).
- Consult a health or mental health professional for advice.
- Find a drug treatment program.
- Join a support group 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 World Service Office
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

Harm Reduction Coalition
Telephone: (212) 213-6376
Web: www.harmreduction.org

Narcotics Anonymous
Telephone: (818) 773-9999
Web: www.na.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

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

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