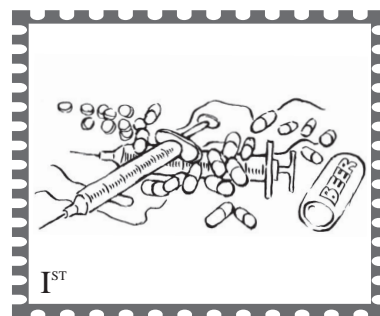


Alcohol and drugs: what parents need to know

Factsheet for parents and teachers

About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet offers practical advice for parents and teachers who are worried that a young person is misusing drugs or alcohol.



Introduction

Who uses alcohol and drugs?

Many young people smoke, drink alcohol and may try drugs. They may do it for fun, because they are curious, or to be like their friends. Some are experimenting with the feeling of intoxication.

Alcohol generally gives you a feeling of relaxation and confidence, although some people feel flat and miserable with it. It is addictive if used regularly. There are serious physical health effects if you drink regularly or binge drink. It can affect the liver, nervous system and brain. There are no known safe limits for children and teenagers. Young people can get themselves into dangerous situations if they are drunk, e.g. fighting, having unprotected sex, or getting into a car with someone who has been drinking.

Cigarettes are highly addictive and cause diseases such as cancer, heart disease and high blood pressure. It can be hard to expect your child not to smoke if you smoke yourself. Fortunately, a lot of support is available now (see list of sources of further information).

Cannabis (grass, dope, weed, skunk) is the most commonly used illegal drug among 11–24 year olds. Cannabis resin looks like a gravy browning cube, or cannabis can look like dried herbs or seeds. It is usually rolled into a 'joint' and smoked like a cigarette or through a special pipe. It can also be baked in cakes. Most people find it makes them feel relaxed, and they may feel they want to talk or laugh a lot. It can also make you feel panicky and nervous, confused, tired and hungry. It can cause lung diseases, just like cigarettes do. For some people, cannabis use can trigger schizophrenia, a serious mental illness (see Factsheet 21 on schizophrenia).

Solvents such as glue, butane gas, and aerosols can be sniffed, sprayed into the mouth/nose, or the fumes breathed in using a gas filled bag. It makes people feel 'high'. These substances can make people do things that they wouldn't normally have the courage to do, and they may hallucinate (see things that aren't there). Solvents can make you feel sick or sleepy, and it is possible to suffocate if a bag is put over your head. The heart can stop and this can lead to death, even when tried for the first time.

Ecstasy (E, pills, brownies, burgers, disco biscuits, hug drug, Mitsubishis, Doves, Rolex's, Dolphins, XTC) comes in tablets in lots of different colours and shapes. They make people feel happy, lively and very friendly. But some people feel anxious and scared. If you take it while dancing a lot, it is easy to become dehydrated and this can be fatal.

Amphetamines (speed, uppers, whizz, amph, sulphate) comes as a powder (orangey yellow or a dirty white) or as tablets. Amphetamines can be swallowed, sniffed, smoked or injected. Sometimes they are made into a liquid to drink. People feel as if they have lots of energy, 'buzzy' and often talk a lot. But, again, you can also feel very scared and anxious or grumpy and some people hallucinate. Amphetamines are stimulants, and so can have effects on the heart that can lead to death.

LSD ('acid', trips, tabs, microdots, stamps) comes on small pieces of paper impregnated with the drug. The little squares have pictures on them. LSD is eaten or sucked. The effect is to hallucinate ('trip') and see odd shapes or colours or hear noises. Trips can be pleasant or terrifying and can last for several hours. You can also have 'flashbacks' several months later, when you have

Sources of further information

- NHS Direct can provide help and advice on any aspect of drug and alcohol use. Tel. 0845 4647; www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk.
- The NHS Smoking Helpline: 0800 169 0169; www.givingupsmoking.co.uk.
- Talk to Frank is a free confidential drugs information and advice line. Tel. 0800776600; e-mail: frank@talktofrank.com; www.talktofrank.com.

Or you may like to look at these websites:

www.addaction.org.uk
www.alcoholconcern.org.uk
www.alcoholics-anonymous.org
www.al-anonuk.org.uk
www.thesite.org/drugs
www.wrecked.co.uk

- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel. 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; fax 020 7245 1231; e-mail: booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk.

similar experiences to the trip, even though you haven't taken LSD for weeks.

Cocaine (coke, snow, Charlie, C,) and **crack cocaine** (rock, wash, stone) make people feel confident and lively. Cocaine is a white powder that is sniffed up the nose, and can be dissolved and injected. Crack cocaine comes as crystals (rocks) the size of a baked bean. It is smoked and has similar effects to cocaine powder, but these effects are more rapid and intense, and wear off quickly. Cocaine can cause chest pains and difficulty breathing. Both cocaine and crack cocaine are highly addictive.

Heroin (H, smack, skag, horse, junk, brown) is a brownish-whitish powder. It is smoked, sniffed or injected and makes people feel very relaxed and content and cut off from the world 'gouching out'. It is highly addictive, even if not injected. Heroin can be fatal as it can stop your breathing.

Tranquillisers (valium, ativan, mogadon, temazepam, moggies, mazzies, tranx, jellies) come as capsules and tablets of differing colours and shapes. They are eaten or injected. People

feel relaxed and may fall asleep. It can be fatal to inject them. They are addictive.

Anabolic steroids (Deca-Durabolin, Dianabol, and Stanozolol) are tablets or liquids that are swallowed or an oily liquid which is injected into the muscle. They increase muscle bulk and can improve sporting strength and ability if taken over time. However, they cause many serious health problems, including breast development in boys, body hair growth in girls, depression and hormonal problems.

References

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- Scott, A., Shaw, M. & Joughin, C. (2001) *Finding the Evidence: A Gateway to the Literature in Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (2nd edn). London: Gaskell.