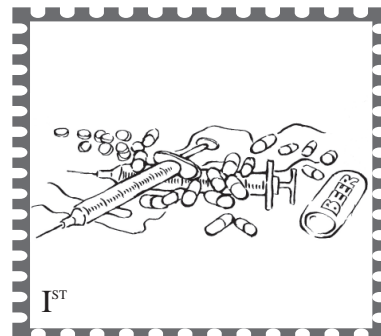


About this factsheet

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 aims to point out the problems with misusing drugs and alcohol, and gives you some ideas about how to avoid falling into doing this.



Introduction

Lots of young people want to know about drugs and alcohol. However much willpower you have, it is very easy to end up finding you have a problem. Although you may initially think that you have your drug or alcohol use 'under control', these things can be very addictive and may soon start to control you.

Commonly used drugs

People use all sorts of substances, both legal and illegal. The obviously illegal drugs are things like cannabis (hash), speed (amphetamines), ecstasy (E), cocaine and heroin. Many legal substances are also harmful and addictive – cigarettes, alcohol, glue, petrol and aerosols. Society's favourite drugs are alcohol and tobacco, both strongly addictive and misused by millions. A few medicines, such as tranquillisers, can also be addictive.

What leads to problems with drugs and alcohol?

- You may worry that if you don't take drugs, you will be 'uncool' and won't fit in.
- Drugs can make you feel good – for a while. Just experimenting with a drug may make you want to try again ... and again
- You find that taking a particular drug makes you feel confident, and may help you to face a difficult situation. After a while, you need the drug to face that situation every time.
- If you are unhappy, stressed, or lonely, you are more likely to turn to drugs to forget your problems.
- If you find that you're using a drug or alcohol more and more often, be careful – this is the first step to becoming dependent on it.

- If you hang out with people who use a lot of drugs, you probably will too.

Risks and dangers

Using street drugs or alcohol might make you feel good, but they can damage your health. Here are some of the basic facts:

- It is dangerous to mix drugs and alcohol. They each may increase the effects of the other substance, e.g. ecstasy and alcohol can lead to dehydration (overheating), and cause coma and death.
- You cannot know for sure what is in the drug you buy. It might not contain what the dealer says. Some dealers might mix it with other substances or you may get a higher dose of a drug than you are used to, which can be fatal.
- Serious infections can be spread by sharing needles or 'equipment', such as HIV and hepatitis.
- Accidents, arguments and fights are more likely after drinking and drug use.
- Using drugs can lead to serious mental illness such as psychosis or depression, and to health problems and overdoses.

Signs that you're hooked

- Do you think about drugs or alcohol everyday?
- Is it hard to say 'no' when they are offered?
- Would you drink/take drugs alone?
- Does taking drugs get in the way of the rest of your life?

If the answer to these questions is 'yes', you may be hooked.

The most common sign that you have a drug problem is the feeling the drug gives you – suddenly, it's not a choice that feels under your control. Soon, you'll find yourself having to take

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.
- NHS Smoking Helpline 0800 169 0169; www.givingupsmoking.co.uk.
- Talk to Frank is a free confidential drugs information and advice line. Tel. 0800 776600; 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, including discipline, behavioural problems and conduct disorder, and stimulant medication. 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, or you can download them from www.rcpsych.ac.uk.

more and more to get the same effect. Then, you'll find that you can't cope without it and that you've got a habit – although you'll find yourself saying 'It's not that I need it but ...'

How to get help

There are different ways of getting help. Think about talking to someone you trust:

- a close friend
- your parents or a family member
- a family friend
- a school nurse
- a social worker
- a teacher/school counsellor
- someone at your place of worship
- a youth counsellor
- your GP or practice nurse, who can refer you on to relevant services, and will be able to offer you advice and support

- a local drug project – see your local area telephone book or ask for the address from your health centre
- your local child and adolescent mental health service – this is a team of skilled professionals, including child psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, psychotherapists and specialist nurses.

References

- Carr, A. (ed.) (2000) *What Works with Children and Adolescents? A Critical Review of Psychological Interventions with Children, Adolescents and their Families*. London: Brunner-Routledge.
- Rutter, M. & Taylor, E. (eds) (2002) *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (4th edn). London: Blackwell.
- 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.