



teenagers and drugs

find out the **facts**

It is inevitable in today's world that most young people will come across drugs. As a parent tackling this issue can be very challenging. Young people get most of their information about drugs from their friends. Often it is inaccurate. An important part of protecting your teenager is to find out the facts. Get informed first and then discuss the issue with them.

What is a drug?

A drug is any chemical substance which affects the normal way that a person's mind or body works.

Part of the confusion that arises over whether or not all drugs are dangerous has to do with what people think of as drugs. The word 'drugs' does not only apply to illegal substances such as heroin, cocaine, or cannabis, but also to many other more 'acceptable' substances such as alcohol, nicotine, prescription and over the counter medicines.

The majority of drug-related problems are caused by legally available substances.

Drug use in teenagers

Teenagers often use the same drugs that are popular with adults, like:

- ◆ alcohol
- ◆ tobacco
- ◆ analgesics (headache tablets like aspirin, paracetamol etc).

As well as being the most popular drugs, these three are also the first drugs that most teenagers experiment with.

The most common illegal drug used by teenagers is cannabis (marijuana). Most teenagers who smoke cannabis say they smoke cigarettes first.

Teenagers take drugs for exactly the same reasons adults do: for enjoyment or 'fun', to relax, to be part of a group, or to cope with stress, boredom or change.

common drugs

ALCOHOL

Alcohol is one of the most widely misused drugs in Australia. It is a depressant, which reduces alertness by slowing down the central nervous system and also has a significant effect on many other parts of the body.

It is important to remember that not all alcohol related problems are about how much we drink, but about when, how and why we drink.

One of the biggest concerns for parents is that teenagers will hurt themselves with drug use. Most teenage deaths from drug use are related to using alcohol and driving.

TOBACCO

Cigarette smoking can cause lung cancer, emphysema and chronic bronchitis.

Many teenagers believe that there is no danger to their health if they don't deeply inhale the smoke. This is untrue. The irritants in cigarettes have been linked to causing cancer of the mouth and throat as well as cancer of the lung and other respiratory disorders.

Many people regard smoking as relaxing in spite of the fact that nicotine is actually a stimulant. This is probably due to the

fact that they associate smoking with taking a break, or perhaps they habitually reach for a cigarette in moments of tension.

PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

One of the major drug problems in our community today is the misuse of prescribed drugs. A significant number of commonly medications are addictive.

When a doctor prescribes a drug for your teenager, it is their responsibility to use it as advised, and to tell the doctor about any side-effects they experience.

NON-PRESCRIPTION MEDICINES

Because non-prescription medicines (like many pain killers, antihistamines, cold and flu remedies, laxatives and antacids) are easy to obtain, people don't usually think of them as drugs. But non-prescription medicines can be dangerous if misused. For example, the use of aspirin or paracetamol over a long period of time can lead to a variety of health problems, like kidney disorders, anaemia and gastric ulcers.

CANNABIS

Cannabis affects your teenager in many ways including producing a state of euphoria.

It can also impair their short-term memory, logical thinking, co-ordination and ability to perform complex tasks. Your teenager's perception, judgment, balance and reaction times are all affected for up to 10 hours after use. Within this period it's dangerous to drive, operate machinery, swim or surf. Large doses of cannabis can produce confusion and hallucinations.

Regular use of cannabis has a number of long-term effects for your teenager. Some are similar to those of tobacco, because cannabis is generally smoked, often in combination with tobacco. Also, marijuana cigarettes (joints) have 50 to 100% more tar than tobacco cigarettes, and marijuana smokers tend to inhale more deeply. Cannabis smoking is associated with increased risk of bronchitis, lung cancer and respiratory diseases.

Many regular users of cannabis, especially young users, find that they begin to lose energy and motivation, and interest in other activities. Their performance at school or work often suffers. These symptoms may be caused by a combination of many factors. But usually they disappear gradually, when cannabis use stops.

mixing drugs

It is dangerous to combine any drug, including alcohol, with other drugs. The effects of most drugs are intensified, though in some cases, for example antibiotics, the therapeutic effects can be neutralised.

Some drug combinations dramatically reduce our ability to do even simple tasks. Mixing alcohol with other drugs is especially risky.

It is particularly dangerous to mix the following drugs with alcohol: antibiotics, antihistamines, codeine, tranquillisers, barbiturates, hallucinogens or cannabis.

Just because a teenager is experimenting, or is exposed to drugs, does not necessarily mean that they are or will become drug dependent.

There are, however, other risks with drug use. Teenagers may suffer harm or have accidents when they are intoxicated or misusing drugs.

Sometimes, drug problems are part of a much larger problem, like not fitting in at school, difficulties at home, not knowing how to approach people they're attracted to etc. Some teenagers use drugs to shut out a frightening world or to rub off the hard edges of reality.

If you think your teenager is using drugs, don't panic. Think about why your teenager may want to use drugs, talk with them about it and look for solutions.

If you are worried about your teen don't hesitate in getting professional help. It may be helpful for your teenager to talk to a

family friend or relative they trust. Or even one of your teenager's friends that you both trust.



Photography by Warwick Orme



less common drugs

AMPHETAMINES – ‘SPEED’

Amphetamines are commonly known as ‘speed’ or ‘goey’. Speed is a stimulant because it speeds up the functions of the central nervous system.

Small doses of speed can produce a feeling of wellbeing, more self confidence and energy. It can also reduce appetite and make a person more alert. However, a small amount can also increase breathing and heart rate, and cause anxiety or nervousness. Higher doses can make these effects more intense. Sweating, headaches and dizziness are other effects while some people become hostile and aggressive.

Using speed over a long period of time can cause health problems, including malnutrition, reduced resistance to infection, emotional disturbances and periods of psychosis. Acute speed poisoning or overdose can cause brain haemorrhage, heart attack, high fever, coma and occasionally death.

ECSTASY

Ecstasy is the common name for MethyleneDioxyMethAmphetamine, or MDMA. It is a manufactured drug usually sold as small tablets which come in a variety of colours and sizes.

Ecstasy is a stimulant because it speeds up the functions of the central nervous system.

The effects of ecstasy depend on the amount taken; the person’s experience with the drug; their expectations; the mood they are in and the way in which the drug is taken. Effects can also depend on the quality and purity of the drug. The effects can start after about an hour and can last up to six hours, and may last as long as 32 hours.

Symptoms can include loss of appetite, insomnia, depression and muscle aches. It can also make concentration difficult – particularly on the day after ecstasy is taken.

Higher doses of ecstasy can produce hallucinations, irrational behaviour, vomiting

and convulsions. There is some evidence to suggest that long term use may cause damage to the brain, heart and liver.

Overdose of ecstasy can occur and some deaths have been related to overheating and dehydration.

In some cases, even small doses of amphetamines and ecstasy may precipitate psychosis in those who have a predisposition. This only occurs in a small number of people.

HEROIN

Heroin is a drug that comes from the opium poppy. It is one of a group of very strong pain-killing drugs called narcotic analgesics or opioids.

Although some young people die from heroin overdoses or problems related to the use of heroin, many more die or become ill from using other drugs, like alcohol.

In 1998 there was an estimated 3,688 alcohol related deaths in Australia while there was 832 illicit drug related deaths.

how can families help?

◆ Talk to your teenager and listen to them

This is the key to building understanding and trust in your family. The more you know about your teenager’s life and their concerns, the easier it will be for you to pick up a problem before it gets too big.

◆ Get yourself well informed about alcohol and other drugs

This will help you answer questions that your teenager asks. It will also help you work out your own views about drugs well before you have to discuss the issues with them.

◆ Make sure your teenager knows you love them and will always try to be on their side, even if you don’t always agree with their behaviour

They will be more willing to share their problems if they feel they can trust you. There is no substitute for being loved.

◆ Negotiate some rules about okay behaviour

Think back to when you were a teenager and how you felt about rules. Remember that as your child grows up many rules need to be reviewed regularly and sometimes relaxed bit by bit. Your teenager is on the way to becoming an adult and needs some freedom to gain the experiences that help them cope with the adult world.

◆ Get to know your teenager’s friends and their parents

Parents can help each other by getting together to talk about their worries and by agreeing to handle some problems in the same way.

◆ Set a good example

Keep your own use of alcohol, medicines and other drugs within safe and sensible limits.

◆ Try to anticipate some of the situations you will have to deal with

For example, your teenager telling you they have had too much to drink or have tried cannabis. Thinking about these things in advance will help you figure out how best to handle these issues if and when they arise.

For more information contact:

Alcohol and Drug Information Service

02 9361 2111 or 1800 422 599

(freecall outside Sydney)

24 hour advice, information and referral



teenagers and drugs