

Drugs - teenagers

Adolescence is typically a period of experimentation, irrespective of parenting skills and influence. Cannabis is the most common illegal drug used by teenagers, with around one in five having tried it at least once. Parents typically worry about their child becoming dependent on drugs such as methamphetamines (speed and ice), ecstasy, heroin and cocaine. However, the more likely threat to any teenager's health is the use of drugs such as alcohol and tobacco.

There is no way to guarantee your child will never take drugs, but you can reduce the possibility of your teenager experiencing drug problems in a number of ways.

Reasons teenagers take drugs

Young people use drugs for similar reasons that adults do – to change how they feel because they want to feel better or different. Reasons may include:

- Socialising with friends, peer pressure or the need to feel part of a group
- Relaxation or fun
- Boredom
- Curiosity, experimentation or wanting to take risks
- To escape from psychological or physiological pain.

Drugs commonly used by teenagers

Alcohol, cannabis and tobacco are the three most commonly used drugs among young people. According to the National Drug Strategy Household Survey of Australians aged 14–19 years, in 2010:

- 67 per cent had tried **alcohol** and just over one in five (21.1 per cent) were drinking alcohol on a weekly basis.
- One in five (21.5 per cent) had tried **cannabis**.
- Just under 12 per cent had tried **tobacco** and just under seven per cent smoked on a daily basis.
- Just over two per cent had tried **amphetamines** for non-medical reasons.
- 4.7 per cent had tried **ecstasy**.
- 2.1 per cent had tried **inhalants** – such as petrol, glue and solvents.
- 2.1 per cent had tried **cocaine**.

The National Drug Strategy Household Survey of Australians also found that just 0.3 per cent of 14–19 year olds had tried **heroin** in 2007 (statistics for this age group are not available for 2010).

Cannabis as a 'gateway' drug for teenagers

Many parents are concerned that if their child tries cannabis, it will only be a matter of time before they progress to other drugs, such as amphetamines and heroin. However, there is no evidence to support the theory that cannabis is a 'gateway' drug that automatically leads to the use of other drugs.

Preventing drug use in teenagers

There are no parenting skills or behaviours that guarantee a young person will never touch drugs. However, parents and guardians can reduce the possibility of a young person experiencing drug problems in a number of ways.

Suggestions include:

- Foster a close and trusting relationship with your child from an early age and support and encourage positive behaviour.
- Model appropriate behaviour such as drinking moderately, not smoking and not using illicit drugs.
- Establish agreements and guidelines about what is acceptable behaviour around alcohol and drugs.
- Encourage a healthy approach to life including good foods, regular exercise and sports.
- Encourage your child to have more than one group of friends.
- Allow your child to practise responsibility and develop good decision-making skills from an early age.
- Keep yourself informed about drugs and educate your child on the dangers of drug use. Do not exaggerate or make information up.
- Have open and honest discussions about drugs.

If you suspect your child is taking drugs

There are no specific signs or behaviours that can tell you a young person is definitely using drugs. Uncharacteristic behaviours such as mood swings, a drop in schooling performance, different friends and a changed appearance may indicate drug use – but they could also indicate other issues that are not drug related.

If you suspect your child is using drugs:

- If possible, don't react on your first impulse – give yourself time to think.
- Resist the urge to snoop or search your child's room or belongings for evidence.
- Research drugs so that you have the facts.
- Raise your concerns calmly with your child when you both feel relaxed.
- If your child is taking drugs, don't issue ultimatums.
- Try to educate your child on the health and lifestyle risks.
- You may have to accept that an older teenager will not stop taking their drug, no matter what you say.
- If your child gets into trouble with the police or has to go to court, support them but let them cope with the consequences such as paying their own fines.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- DrugInfo Tel. 1300 85 85 84
- Youth Support and Advocacy Service Tel. 1800 014 446
- DirectLine Tel. 1800 888 236
- CounsellingOnline – for counselling and referral
- Family Drug Help Tel. 1300 660 068
- Parentline Tel. 132 289
- If an overdose is suspected, call 000 for an ambulance immediately

Things to remember

- Alcohol, cannabis and tobacco are the most common drugs used by teenagers.
- Young people use drugs for many reasons: for fun, out of curiosity, to feel part of a group or to change how they feel because they want to feel better or different.
- There is no evidence to support the theory that using cannabis will automatically lead to someone using other drugs such as amphetamines and heroin.
- Help is available for parents and young people who have concerns about drug use.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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