Drugs and teenagers
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.

The teenage years are typically a period of experimentation, regardless 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 legal 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. Other 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 12–17 years in 2013:

- 72.3 per cent were choosing not to drink, but 8.7 per cent had more than four standard drinks at least once a month
- around one in six (14.8 per cent) had tried cannabis
- 94.7 per cent had never smoked tobacco and just under 3.7 per cent smoked on a daily basis.

According to the report *Australian secondary school students’ use of tobacco, alcohol, and over-the-counter and illicit substances in 2011*:

- three per cent had tried amphetamines
- three per cent had tried ecstasy
- around one in six 12–17 year olds had deliberately sniffed inhalants at least once – such as petrol, glue and solvents
- 1.9 per cent of 12–17 year olds who had taken cocaine had only used it once or twice
- 1.5 per cent had tried heroin.

**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, which 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.

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

- If an overdose is suspected, call 000 for an ambulance immediately
- Your doctor
- DrugInfo, Tel. 1300 85 85 84
- Youth and Advocacy Service [ ] Tel. 1800 458 685
- DirectLine, Tel. 1800 888 236
- CounsellingOnline – for counselling and referral
- Family Drug Help, Tel. 1300 660 068
- Parentline, Tel. 13 22 89

References

- Young people, alcohol and illegal drugs. Child and Youth Health, South Australia.

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More information

Young people (13-19)

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Young people basics
- Growth and development
- Communication and behaviour
- Healthy eating
- Keeping active
- Managing weight
- Smoking, alcohol and drugs
- Identity and relationships
- Sex and sexuality
- School and study
- Health and wellbeing
- Health conditions and complaints
- Grief and trauma

Young people basics

- Teenage health
  Your young people have to work through a broad range of issues as they move from childhood to adulthood.
- Alcohol - how much is too much? (video)
  Youth Central journalist Soren Frederiksen asks young people what they think is the limit for safe drinking and comes up with some interesting results.
- Assessing your alcohol and drug use
  If you are worried about your alcohol or drug use or, call DirectLine on 1800 888 236 for counselling, information and referral, or speak with your local doctor.

betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Drugs and teenagers Page 5 of 14
• **Depression in young people**
  Young people can feel sad and worried about life events but with depression, the feelings of sadness go on for weeks or months and affect everyday life.

• **FreeZA**
  FreeZA supports young Victorians to get involved in community life through planning and staging drug, alcohol and smoke-free music and cultural events for other young people in their local community.

• **Growth and weight changes in teenagers**
  The end of a growth spurt may trigger a drop in appetite, so don't immediately assume that your child is trying to lose weight.

• **Helping your child with mental illness**
  Recognising that your child has a mental health problem and seeking professional support are important first steps to take.

• **Immunisation – deciding which vaccines you need**
  Everyone's immunisation needs are different and are influenced by your health, lifestyle, age and occupation.

• **Partying safely**
  It is important to create a safe environment at parties so that everyone can have fun. Staying safe means avoiding injury or assault, not hurting anyone else, and not ruining an event or...

• **Puberty**
  Adjusting to the many changes that happen around puberty can be difficult for both parents and young people.

• **Teenagers and communication**
  Accept that your adolescent may have a different view of the world and respect their opinions.

• **Young carers**
  Even though you are caring for someone else, it is important that you remember to take care of yourself.

• **Young people and health services**
  There are many subsidised and free medical, dental, mental, community health services available to support young people in Victoria.

**Growth and development**

• **Growing pains**
  Growing pains may cause a lot of pain but they are harmless and can respond to simple treatments.

• **Growth and weight changes in teenagers**
  The end of a growth spurt may trigger a drop in appetite, so don't immediately assume that your child is trying to lose weight.

• **Growth charts for children**
  Babies and young children do not usually grow in a perfectly smooth way, but instead grow in 'bursts'.

• **Puberty**
  Adjusting to the many changes that happen around puberty can be difficult for both parents and young people.

**Communication and behaviour**

• **Teenagers and communication**
  Accept that your adolescent may have a different view of the world and respect their opinions.

• **Assertiveness**
  It is helpful to imagine assertiveness as the middle ground between aggression and passivity.

• **Bullying**
  Parents can help with bullying by supporting their child and involving the authorities to find solutions.

• **Cyberbullying (online bullying)**
  Cyberbullying (or online bullying) happens when technology is used to bully someone.

• **Internet addiction**
  Internet addiction refers to the compulsive need to spend a lot of time on the Internet, to the point where relationships, work and health suffer.
Internet safety for children
A child's digital footprint can be as easy to follow as their real footprints...

Mobile phone safety for children
Teach your child strategies for responding to mobile phone bullying...

Peer pressure
Peer groups can be a very positive influence on your teenager's life...

Receptive language disorder
Receptive language disorder means the child has difficulties with understanding what is said to them...

Tertiary studies - settling in
Starting tertiary studies can be challenging and stressful, but your institution can provide counselling and other support services...

Healthy eating

Teenagers and healthy eating
A teenager who consumes healthy meals and snacks will maintain their weight and meet their requirements for essential nutrients like calcium and iron...

Tertiary students and healthy eating
It's not difficult or expensive to plan, shop and cook your own meals, even if you're on a tight budget...

Body image and diets
Some people diet because they have a poor body image, not because they want to be a healthy weight...

Breakfast
Children who skip breakfast may lack sufficient vitamins and minerals including iron, calcium, zinc and vitamin B2...

Children's diet - fruit and vegetables
If you eat and enjoy fruit and vegetables every day, your child may eventually follow your lead...

Eating disorders and adolescents
Often, an eating disorder develops as a way for an adolescent to feel in control about what's happening in their life...

Healthy eating - school lunches
Simple ways to make your child's school lunch healthier...

Healthy eating tips
A good balance between exercise and food intake is important to maintain a healthy body weight...

Lunch - avoid the fast food fix (video)
Nutritionist Shane Hillsborough shows us how much energy it takes to burn off a fast food lunch. Join tradies, Corky and Danny as they find out how to maintain a healthy weight...

Lunch boxes - healthy ideas
Healthy foods that are great for school lunch boxes...

Lunch boxes - menu planner
By planning ahead, you can make sure that your child's lunch box has each of the six key elements of a healthy lunchbox...

Lunch box tips
Encourage children to help choose and prepare their own healthy snacks or lunch...

Tips to keep our snacks on track (slideshow)
Most of us are prone to the odd snack or two. Check out these simple tips to keep your snacks on track...

Vegetarian diets and children
Children can eat a vegetarian diet and stay healthy as long as their extra nutritional needs are met...

Keeping active

Getting active - tucker talk tips
The main thing is to choose physical activities that you enjoy and that you can stick to in the long term.

- **Parent's guide for active girls**
  Physical activity is an important part of health and wellbeing, and girls should remain active as they grow up.

- **Physical activity - overcoming barriers (video)**
  Former world aerobics champion, Sue Stanley shows us how to overcome common exercise excuses.

- **Sport and children**
  Make sure that some family outings offer opportunities for physical activity, such as playing sport together.

- **Sports injuries**
  A sports injury may be more severe than you think.

### Managing weight

- **Body image and diets**
  Some people diet because they have a poor body image, not because they want to be a healthy weight.

- **Body mass index (BMI)**
  Body mass index or BMI is an approximate measure of your total body fat.

- **Growth charts for children**
  Babies and young children do not usually grow in a perfectly smooth way, but instead grow in 'bursts'.

- **Obesity in children - causes**
  Once children are overweight, it takes a lot of effort for them to return to a healthy weight.

- **Obesity in children - management**
  If your child is overweight, you can help by making healthier lifestyle choices for yourself.

- **Weight loss and fad diets**
  With a balanced eating plan, it's what you leave in that makes all the difference.

### Smoking, alcohol and drugs

- **Alcohol and teenagers**
  Alcohol is responsible for most drug-related deaths in the teenage population.

- **Alcohol consumption – when things don't go to plan (video)**
  Don't give up if your plan doesn't work the first time.

- **Alcohol - tips to turning down drinks (video)**
  Saying no can be hard. There are things you can do to make it easier.

- **Drugs and teenagers**
  Teenagers use drugs for similar reasons that adults do.

- **Partying safely - schoolies week**
  Partying at schoolies week can be fun, but you need to be aware of the risks, which can include accidents, robbery, violence and sexual assault.

- **Partying safely - tips for teenagers**
  Don't advertise a party via SMS or the internet to limit the risk of gate-crashers and violent situations.

- **Smoking - how to discourage your children**
  Children are less likely to smoke if their parents do not smoke.

- **Smoking - the financial cost**
  If you want to quit smoking, think about how much of your weekly income is going up in smoke.

- **Talking to kids about drugs**
  All children are eventually exposed to drugs – prescription medication, alcohol and tobacco, and sometimes illegal drugs too – or to messages about drugs.
Identity and relationships

- **Assertiveness**
  It is helpful to imagine assertiveness as the middle ground between aggression and passivity...

- **Body image and diets**
  Some people diet because they have a poor body image, not because they want to be a healthy weight...

- **Body image and young people - staying positive (video)**
  The pressure on young girls and boys to be physically perfect is creating an epidemic of children and teenagers with low self-esteem and negative body image. Reporter Flip Shelton introduces us to the...

- **Body image - men**
  Homosexual men and athletes are particularly vulnerable to poor body image or feeling insecure about their bodies...

- **Body image - tips for parents**
  Give your child opportunities to appreciate their body for what it can do, rather than what it looks like...

- **Bullying**
  Parents can help with bullying by supporting their child and involving the authorities to find solutions...

- **Cyberbullying (online bullying)**
  Cyberbullying (or online bullying) happens when technology is used to bully someone...

- **Depression in young people**
  Young people can feel sad and worried about life events but with depression, the feelings of sadness go on for weeks or months and affect everyday life...

- **Family conflict**
  It is normal to disagree with each other from time to time and occasional conflict is part of family life...

- **Family violence and children**
  Children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to experience emotional and behavioural problems...

- **Helping your child with mental illness**
  Recognising that your child has a mental health problem and seeking professional support are important first steps to take...

- **Internet safety for children**
  A child's digital footprint can be as easy to follow as their real footprints...

- **Is my body normal? (Boys)**
  Boys’ bodies come in all shapes and sizes. As you get older, and go through puberty, you become more aware of your body and how it compares with others. Boys’ bodies come in all shapes and sizes...

- **Is my body normal? (Girls)**
  Puberty is a time when your body goes through lots of changes. It’s wonderful and exciting, and can sometimes feel overwhelming. This is the time your body changes from being a girl into being a woman...

- **Making friends**
  Friendships are an important part of life, but many of us find it difficult to find, make or keep friends...

- **Mobile phone safety for children**
  Teach your child strategies for responding to mobile phone bullying...

- **Moving out of home - tips for young people**
  If you are leaving home, try to go on a positive note. Hopefully, your parents are happy about your plans and support your decision...

- **Partying safely and sex**
  Partying is fun but being out of it on alcohol or drugs can put you at risk of unwanted or unsafe sex...

- **Peer pressure**
Peer groups can be a very positive influence on your teenager's life.

- **Piercings**
  If you want to have your body pierced, choose an experienced, registered practitioner to reduce the risks of infection and scarring.

- **Sex – are you ready**
  It is normal to have mixed feelings about having sex with someone else.

- **Strong relationships, strong health**
  Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links.

- **Tattoos**
  If you want to get a tattoo, choose an experienced, registered practitioner to reduce the risks of infection and scarring.

### Sex and sexuality

- **Sex – are you ready**
  It is normal to have mixed feelings about having sex with someone else.

- **Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)**
  It is not difficult to avoid catching sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

- **Bisexuality**
  Bisexuality is when a person finds men and women physically, sexually or emotionally attractive.

- **Gay male sexuality**
  There is no real explanation as to why some men are gay and others are not; it is just part of the wide variety of human sexuality.

- **Lesbian sexuality**
  Many women report they have lesbian experiences or feelings, but do not think of themselves as lesbians.

- **Men and sexuality**
  Sexuality is not about whom we have sex with, or how often we have it. Sexuality is about our sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions and behaviours towards other people. We can find other people.

- **Menstrual cycle**
  The menstrual cycle is complex and is controlled by many different glands and the hormones that these glands produce.

- **Oral sex**
  Oral sex is using your mouth, lips or tongue to stimulate your partner’s genitals or anus. Both men and women can give and receive oral sex.

- **Partying safely and sex**
  Partying is fun but being out of it on alcohol or drugs can put you at risk of unwanted or unsafe sex.

- **Sex education - tips for parents**
  Mothers are more likely to talk about intimate, emotional and psychological aspects of sex than fathers.

- **Sexuality explained**
  Sexuality is not about whom we have sex with, or how often we have it. Sexuality is about our sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions and behaviours towards other people. We can find other people.

- **Time to immunise - free vaccines for men who have sex with men**
  Immunisation is one of the best ways you can protect yourself and others from infectious diseases in our community. In partnership with Thorne Harbour Health (formerly Victorian AIDS Council), the...

- **Trans and gender diverse people**
  Your gender is what feels natural to you, even if it is different from your biological sex. Some people may not feel comfortable with their biological sex but choose to live with the gender with which...

- **Women and sexuality**
  Most girls start puberty around 10 years old, but it can be earlier or later than that. Your body will go through big changes as you change from a girl into a young woman. For some girls (and women...
School and study

- **10 tips to prepare your child for high school**
  
  Visit the school before the school year starts... 10 tips to prepare your child for high school...

- **Chronic illness - coping at school**
  
  Supporting a student with a chronic illness requires a 'whole school' approach...

- **Cyberbullying (online bullying)**
  
  Cyberbullying (or online bullying) happens when technology is used to bully someone...

- **Tertiary students and healthy eating**
  
  It's not difficult or expensive to plan, shop and cook your own meals, even if you're on a tight budget...

- **Tertiary studies - managing stress**
  
  Stress is a common issue for all tertiary students, but there are lots of ways to manage your stress...

- **Tertiary studies - settling in**
  
  Starting tertiary studies can be challenging and stressful, but your institution can provide counselling and other support services...

- **Year 12 exams - managing stress**
  
  Help your child manage stress during exams by getting them to use good study habits, eat well, exercise, relax, sleep and keep things in perspective...

Health and wellbeing

- **Depression in young people**
  
  Young people can feel sad and worried about life events but with depression, the feelings of sadness go on for weeks or months and affect everyday life...

- **Eating disorders and adolescents**
  
  Often, an eating disorder develops as a way for an adolescent to feel in control about what's happening in their life...

- **Family violence and children**
  
  Children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to experience emotional and behavioural problems...

- **Helping your child with mental illness**
  
  Recognising that your child has a mental health problem and seeking professional support are important first steps to take...

- **Immunisation – deciding which vaccines you need**
  
  Everyone's immunisation needs are different and are influenced by your health, lifestyle, age and occupation...

- **Immunisation in secondary schools**
  
  Some immunisations are recommended for all Australian teenagers...

- **Partying safely - schoolies week**
  
  Partying at schoolies week can be fun, but you need to be aware of the risks, which can include accidents, robbery, violence and sexual assault...

- **Partying safely – tips for teenagers**
  
  Don't advertise a party via SMS or the internet to limit the risk of gate-crashers and violent situations...

- **Recognising when a child is at risk**
  
  Too many children are physically, sexually and emotionally abused and when this happens, it is up to adults to speak up...

- **Teenage health**
  
  Young people have to work through a broad range of issues as they move from childhood to adulthood...

Health conditions and complaints

- **Acne**
  
  Acne is common and can make people of all ages feel embarrassed, but treatments can help if acne is causing distress...

- **Asthma and teenagers**
Asthma affects about one in ten teenagers in Australia.

- **Diabetes - issues for children and teenagers**
  Many parents worry when their child with diabetes starts or returns to school.

- **Eating disorders**
  Eating disorders are a mental illness and can affect women and men of all age groups.

- **Glandular fever**
  Glandular fever is most common among high school and university students, but young children can also become infected by saliva on toys, shared cups, or the hands of caregivers.

- **Obesity in children - causes**
  Once children are overweight, it takes a lot of effort for them to return to a healthy weight.

- **Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)**
  It is not difficult to avoid catching sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

**Grief and trauma**

- **Cyberbullying (online bullying)**
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- **Helping your child with mental illness**
  Recognising that your child has a mental health problem and seeking professional support are important first steps to take.

- **Trauma and teenagers - common reactions**
  A teenager may be deeply upset by a traumatic event, but not share their feelings with their parents.

- **Trauma and teenagers - tips for parents**
  Teenagers may turn to friends rather than parents for support in times of trauma and distress.

- **Youth suicide – the warning signs**
  All suicide threats are serious. You don't have to be a trained professional to help a person contemplating suicide.

**Related Information**

- **Smoking - how to discourage your children**
  Children are less likely to smoke if their parents do not smoke.

- **Alcohol - tips to turning down drinks (video)**
  Saying no can be hard. There are things you can do to make it easier.

- **Alcohol consumption – when things don't go to plan (video)**
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**Related information on other websites**

- [AIHW – Statistics on drug use in Australia](https://www.aihw.gov.au)
- [Centre for Adolescent Health](https://www.adolescenthealth.org.au)
- [DrugInfo](https://www.druginfo.com.au)
- [Parenting Strategies Program - Preventing Adolescent Alcohol Misuse](https://www.parentingstrategies.org.au)

**Support Groups**
