

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

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Teens: Alcohol and Other Drugs

Experimentation with alcohol and drugs during adolescence is common. Unfortunately, teenagers often don't see the link between their actions today and the consequences tomorrow. They also have a tendency to feel indestructible and immune to the problems that others experience.

Using alcohol and tobacco at a young age has negative health effects. Some teens will experiment and stop, or continue to use occasionally, without significant problems. Others will develop a dependency, moving on to more dangerous drugs and causing significant harm to themselves and possibly others. It is difficult to know which teens will experiment and stop and which will develop serious problems. Teenagers at risk for developing serious alcohol and drug problems include those:

- with a family history of substance use disorders
- who are depressed
- who have low self-esteem, and
- who feel like they don't fit in or are out of the mainstream

Teenagers abuse a variety of drugs, both legal and illegal. Legally available drugs include alcohol, prescribed medications, inhalants (fumes from glues, aerosols, and solvents) and over-the-counter cough, cold, sleep, and diet medications. The most commonly used illegal drugs are marijuana (pot), stimulants (cocaine, crack, and speed), LSD, PCP, opiates, heroin, and designer drugs (Ecstasy). The use of illegal drugs is increasing, especially among young teens. The average age of first marijuana use is 14, and alcohol use can start before age 12. The use of marijuana and alcohol in high school has become common.

Drug use is associated with a variety of negative consequences, including increased risk of serious drug use later in life, school failure, and poor judgment which may put teens at risk for accidents, violence, unplanned and unsafe sex, and suicide.

Parents can prevent their children from using drugs by talking to them about drugs, open communication, role modeling, responsible behavior, and recognizing if problems are developing.

Warning signs of teenage alcohol and drug use may include:

Physical: Fatigue, repeated health complaints, red and glazed eyes, and a lasting cough.

Emotional: personality change, sudden mood changes, irritability, irresponsible behavior, low self-esteem, poor judgment, depression, and a general lack of interest.

Family: starting arguments, breaking rules, or withdrawing from the family.

School: decreased interest, negative attitude, drop in grades, many absences, truancy, and discipline problems.

Social problems: new friends who are less interested in standard home and school activities, problems with the law, and changes to less conventional styles in dress and music.

Some of the warning signs listed above can also be signs of other problems. Parents may recognize signs of trouble and possible use of alcohol and other drugs with their teenager. If you have concerns you may want to consult a physician to rule out physical causes of the warning signs. This should often be followed or accompanied by a comprehensive evaluation by a child and adolescent psychiatrist or mental health professional.

For additional information see *Facts for Families*:

[#4 The Depressed Child](#)

[#17 Children of Alcoholics](#)

[#33 Conduct Disorders](#)

[#00 Definition of a Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist](#)

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