

# The truth about popular drugs

*If you're like most people, you've heard a lot about drugs. If you're like most parents, you're concerned about the dangers they could present for your kids, but you're not completely sure what those dangers are. Here is a brief look at some drugs that you may know of or have heard of in the media.*

## Legal drugs

The most commonly used and abused drugs are the legal drugs, which most people don't even think of as drugs. More deaths, illnesses and injuries are caused by alcohol and tobacco than by all of the other legal and illegal drugs combined.

- *Tobacco* – besides causing cancer, tobacco has been linked to causing lung disease, heart disease and many other health problems.
- *Alcohol* – drinking heavily over a long period of time can lead to serious health problems such as stomach ulcers, liver disease and many kinds of cancer.
- *Caffeine* – excessive coffee, cola and energy drink consumption can lead to insomnia, anxiety attacks, headaches and irregular heartbeat.
- *Over-the-counter drugs (OTCs) and prescription medications* can also cause problems, and can even be addictive, if they are not used for their intended purpose or if the person using them takes more than what is prescribed or recommended.

## Illegal drugs

These are the drugs you hear most about in the media. The good news is that use of these drugs is low; unfortunately, the consequences for the small percentage of people who do use them can be devastating.

- *Cannabis*, also known as marijuana and hash, is the most used illegal drug in Canada, among both adults and kids. Marijuana smoke causes many of the same problems as tobacco smoke.
- *Crack* is a form of cocaine that can be smoked or inhaled; in any form cocaine is highly addictive both physically and psychologically.
- *Ecstasy* can lead to death from dehydration, overdose or from a potent drug or toxin being sold as ecstasy.
- *Uppers*, stimulant drugs that were originally introduced for weight loss or to stay awake, deplete energy and can lead users to experience anxiety, hallucinations, paranoia or psychosis.
- *Methamphetamine* can be smoked or snorted (known as crystal meth) or swallowed (known as “speed”) and is highly addictive and destructive.

Drugs do not affect everyone in the same way. How a drug affects someone depends on the person (body size, health factors, metabolism, etc.), the drug (dosage, purity, etc.), and the environment in which the person is using the drug. Drugs taken in combination can have a much greater effect than either drug could have on its own (for example, alcohol combined with some painkillers has caused brain damage).

The best thing you can do is arm yourself with knowledge about drugs, so that you can openly discuss them with your children and be prepared if they ask you questions or start showing signs of drug use. For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.

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# How do I talk to my teenager about drugs?

*Talking to your teen about alcohol and other drugs can be challenging. It's hard to know where to start. You might worry that if you raise the topic, it will somehow encourage your child to experiment. You might feel unsure about the subject or feel that your teen's decisions are beyond your control. These feelings of doubt and uncertainty are all normal.*

## **Here are ten tips to help you:**

- Work on listening to your child. Make sure your child knows you care about what he or she has to say. The more you listen, the more likely your teen will open up and tell you about their worries, who they like hanging out with, what they enjoy doing and what is important to them.
- Educate yourself. Get accurate, up-to-date facts about alcohol and the other drugs your child may encounter. Share this information with your teen to ensure you both have the same understanding.
- Set guidelines for behaviour in discussion with your teenager. Be clear about the consequences of both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.
- Look at life through your child's eyes. Help your teen to make sense of lifestyles seen in advertising and on TV shows. Use examples from the media as openings to talk about drugs and decision-making.
- Encourage questions. Teens often have lots, but are reluctant to ask because they worry about appearing naive. This can lead them into social situations and actions they feel unsure about but are too embarrassed to avoid.
- Avoid the temptation to use scare tactics. These can actually backfire, as your teen may know people who use particular drugs and are not addicted. So, for example, telling them that everyone becomes addicted to a drug could lead them to believe it's all a lie and to not trust anything else you tell them about drugs.
- Don't judge when you respond to questions. Once your teen learns to trust you, they'll be more likely to ask for your opinion on issues such as sexual relationships, and the pressure to use alcohol and other drugs.
- Share your own stories. Perhaps there are some incidents from your own past that you would like to tell your teen. Hearing how you dealt with pressures could be helpful to your child.
- Let your child know that it is natural to have problems and make mistakes.
- Practise what you preach; your child may not take your concern seriously if you don't demonstrate responsible decision-making in your own use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

Keep in mind that your children look up to you. If they see you making healthy decisions, they will be more likely to make healthy choices themselves.

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# How do I know if my teen is using drugs?

*It's hard to believe that your child could be using alcohol or other drugs. Many teens experiment with drugs, and you need to know how to recognize the signs that they may be experiencing problems.*

## What are the signs?

Remember, you know your kids. You do not need to be an expert to detect drug use. Trust yourself to know when there is a problem. When they were babies you could tell when they were sick because they weren't acting themselves. In the same way, you will notice when your teen's behaviour changes, and such changes could be the sign of drug use. Keep in mind that these changes could be due to other reasons and there isn't a single sign that only points to drug use.

Possible changes to watch for include changes in

- school performance
- attitudes toward sports and other activities
- weight or physical appearance
- eating or sleeping habits
- mood swings
- withdrawing from family
- friends
- behaviour

## What should I do?

If you notice changes in your child's behaviour, friends and/or mood, talk to them. Tell them you are concerned and explain why. If you suspect that your child is using alcohol or other drugs, you may feel that you need to catch them using. Perhaps you feel that you should search their room or control their activities and friends. These are normal feelings. After all, you want them to be safe.

It is much more helpful to talk with your child about the changes you have observed. Tell them the differences you see between the way they used to behave and the way they behave now. Try not to judge them. Stay focused on their behaviour. For example, saying "You used to be considerate!" may seem like a personal attack. If you concentrate on the behaviour you are observing, you will be less likely to hurt or offend them. For example, "You used to call when you were going to be late and you don't anymore. Would you be willing to do that again?"

It is possible that there is another cause for their behaviour. Some medical conditions can appear as drug use and it is important to involve your family doctor as well in determining the best next steps. If drug use ends up being the problem, help is available. And remember, you can see a counsellor to help you find new ways of reaching your teen.

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### OTHER TITLES

#### Create It

*Teaching your children to talk about their feelings*

*How can I help my young child learn to get along with others?*

*If you're a parent, you're a role model: How to teach your children by example*

#### Nurture It

*How can I teach my young child to deal with peer pressure?*

*Teaching your children the truth about drugs and gambling*

*How can I help my young child to be more confident?*

*How to listen actively to your children*

#### Choose It

*How can I help my child if my partner is addicted?*

*Helping your teen work through anger*

*The truth about popular drugs*

*How do I know if my teen is using drugs?*

*How do I talk to my teenager about drugs?*

*Raves and club drugs: How do I protect my kids?*

#### Get It Back

*Helping teens evaluate their drug use*

*How bad is my teen's drinking or drug use?*

*Does your teen's drug use leave you feeling like you're losing your sanity?*

*How to get through to your teen*

*Intervening when your teen is using drugs*

*Getting help for your son or daughter who is drinking, using other drugs or gambling*

*Supporting your son or daughter in recovery*

YOUR DAUGHTER IS USING DRUGS and you want her to stop. Your son is drinking too much and you think he should quit. Every time you try to talk to your teen you end up disagreeing and feeling like you've gotten nowhere. How do you get through to your kids?

Trying to get someone you care about to change their behaviour is hard. Often it seems like your teen doesn't hear a word you say. The harder you try to help them see the problem, the more they seem to resist. Why can't they see the problems the drug use is creating?

The answer isn't simple, but there is an answer. If you want your teen to change, you need to understand the process of change itself. Changing behaviour doesn't happen overnight. You can see six separate stages in the process of change.

#### 1. "I don't see a problem" (precontemplation)

Stage one starts before the person is even thinking about changing. The person doesn't see a problem and has no intention of changing their behaviour. When your son or daughter is in this stage, you might hear things like, "It's not a problem," "Get off my case," or, "I don't use any more than any of my friends."

When your teen doesn't see a problem and you pressure them to change before they are ready, they are likely to dig their heels in. The harder you try to convince them that they have a problem, the more strongly they might try to deny it. This is where the arguments usually start—you see a problem and they don't, and so you become deadlocked.

If your teen is not yet thinking about change, the most helpful thing you can do is provide information that helps them to see what a problem looks like. Make sure you give them factual, unbiased information that

shows both sides of the story. This is often very hard for parents to do. When you love someone and are worried about them, you tend to focus on the dangers and the downside of the situation. But kids are much more likely to engage in conversation if both sides are presented. They are more likely to learn if they can see that you're willing to learn too.

Help your teen to make informed choices by providing accurate information about drinking and other drug use.

This doesn't mean you can't express your concern. You're worried and afraid for your teen—that's a fact, too. Continue to tell them how you feel and how their behaviour is affecting you.

#### 2. "Maybe I have a problem, but I hope I don't" (contemplation)

The second stage of change happens when the person starts to think that maybe their behaviour is starting to be a problem. They might admit to having a problem one day and then be really unsure the next. If your son or daughter is in this stage, you might hear things like "Well, maybe I have a bit of a problem, but I can deal with it on my own," "I know that my drug use is creating trouble between us," or, "I'm not sure if I have a problem or not." A lot of mixed feelings about whether or not there is truly a problem are very common in this stage.

If your teen is in the undecided stage, they are probably struggling to understand the problem. It can be very helpful for you to help them look at both sides of the decision to change. Help them look at the benefits of changing as well as the costs

of not changing their behaviour. For tips on how to do this, the activity on page 3 is a starting point.

### **3. “I want to change, but not today” (preparation)**

In the third stage of change your son or daughter will have to make the big decision: if I do change, what will I have to do? People who are in this stage are preparing to make the change. They might experiment to see what the change would be like—cut down on their drinking or limit their drug use to weekends. Mixed feelings are still common, but they are leaning strongly toward change.

If your son or daughter is in this stage, you might hear things like: “I know I need to stop, but I’ll do it next month,” or, “I want to quit but I’m not sure how.”

As a parent, one way to be helpful at this stage is to assist your teen in exploring all the options. Everyone is different and there is no one right way to change behaviour. Some people are able to stop drinking or using other drugs by going to counselling; others like to use a support group such as Narcotics Anonymous. For some, attending a residential treatment program works best. Help your son or daughter look at all the options so that they may choose the one that fits best for them.

### **4. “I’m ready” (action)**

The fourth stage is the one where your son or daughter will actually make the behaviour change—they’ll quit drinking or quit using other drugs. This is the stage that most parents hope their kids will be in right from the beginning. But, you can now see that this is actually the fourth step in a process. Until your teen has worked through the earlier three stages, it is unlikely that they will be ready to actually make the change. The good news is that once your teen is ready to change, there is lots of help available.

As a parent, your role in this stage is to support your teen’s efforts to get help. Please be patient. Remember that change is a process and that this “action” stage will take time. Problems don’t develop overnight and they don’t go away that easily either. Your child may need to work with a counsellor, use a support group and maybe even go to a treatment centre to start on the road to recovery.

### **5. “Staying on the recovery road” (maintenance)**

You may not want to hear this, but changing the behaviour is the easy part. Maintaining that change will take even more work. Once your teen has actually stopped drinking or using other drugs, they will have to learn new ways of living so that they are not at risk of falling back into old behaviour. This is called relapse prevention.

Many people who successfully change their behaviour remain in a maintenance stage for the rest of their lives. They are constantly practising their new living skills to navigate a world where alcohol and other drugs are readily available. In this stage, many recovering alcohol or other drug abusers continue to use counselling and support groups to help them stay strong and enjoy recovery.

Sometimes relapse happens. Your son or daughter might go back to drinking or using other drugs. Often this is a one-time slip and your teen will learn from the experience and get back on track. Sometimes the use continues and your son or daughter will return to the old behaviour. Although nobody wants to encourage slips or relapses, they are often a part of recovery. If your teen relapses, help them to get back on track. Remember they have gone through five stages of change already and none of that has been lost. A slip is like a setback or a temporary detour on the recovery road. What’s important is to help them get back on track without feeling like they have failed.

### **6. “I’ve made it” (termination)**

At this stage, change has already happened. Returning to the old behaviour is no longer a temptation. People who reach termination have complete confidence in their ability to cope without any threat of relapse. Very few changers ever reach this stage. Most continue to focus on maintaining the positive changes they have made and keep on getting better and better.

Now that you understand how behaviour change actually happens, you are better equipped to get through to your teen. That’s a process, too, and it will likely take time and patience to help your son or daughter to see a problem. Work with them, not against them. Recognize what stage they are in and try to “meet” them there. Match your actions to their stage and chances are they’ll move forward a little at a time.

### **Patience with progress**

When you find yourself becoming impatient or wishing that your kid would hurry up and change, talk to a counsellor or join a support group yourself. Take small steps forward, helping your teen move toward change. Pressuring them to change before they are ready will likely result in them taking a step backwards. Think back to a time before the problem occurred. Your teen was doing lots of things right back then. Change is possible. Help them to get it back—get their life back.

### For more information

We understand that everyone's needs are different. Whether you want to prevent your child from using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs, or you want to help your child deal with a drug problem, we can help. Information and prevention programs, group and family counselling, outpatient and residential treatment, and the Protection of Children Abusing Drugs program are offered by Alberta Health Services and its funded services to help your child and your family.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.

\* The stages outlined above are based on Prochaska, Norcross and Diclemente's stages of change from *Changing for Good*, 1994.

## Activity Page

Anytime someone is struggling to make a decision about whether or not to change a behaviour, the following exercise can help. You may choose to do this exercise with your teen or they may feel more comfortable doing it on their own. Either way, the idea is to acknowledge that there are two sides to any behaviour—the reasons we do it and the reasons we might choose to change it.

As a parent, if you focus only on the reasons your teen should stop using, you will likely get lots of "Yes, but...." answers. In a way, you encourage your son or daughter to argue for the other side—reasons to use. If you listen to the reasons your son or daughter uses—really listen—you will come across as much more open-minded. You don't have to agree with their reasons but until your kid gets to express them, they are often not willing to look at the other side. Once they feel heard, kids are much more likely to explore issues in a more balanced way.

### How to use this tool

1. Fill in the decision to be made on the line provided.
2. Fill in the left-hand side of the page first—list all the good things about using (for example: fit in with my friends, like being high, fun).
3. List all the "not-so-good" things about using (this is where you list the tough stuff such as: might get addicted, drugs cost lots of money, best friend gets concerned when I get high, etc.).

This exercise doesn't have to be completed at one sitting. You can add to it as you think of new ideas.

The bottom line: changing any behaviour is hard; there are always two sides to every decision. You're in the driver's seat. When the benefits of changing outweigh the things you'd be giving up, you can make a choice to change. Look back at where you came from, to everything you had going for you before the problem began. You can "get it back."

Decision: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Whether or not to smoke, drink, use other drugs, gamble, etc.)

Good things about using

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