

## Teenage Drug Addiction:



Many teens experiment with substances but don't continue to use them. For some adolescents, however, trying a substance like alcohol, marijuana, or illicit drugs leads to regular use. Once withdrawal and cravings set in, a teen dealing with [addiction](#) and dependence may not be able to stop using a substance, even if they want to.

### What Causes Teens to Use Drugs?

The reasons why any person uses drugs are complex, and the same is true for teens. Wanting to fit in with peers, feeling overwhelmed by their changing brains and bodies, and pressure to perform in school or sports are just a few reasons why teens may start experimenting with drugs. Teens may not seek drugs out but are instead introduced to substances by someone they know, such as a friend, teammate, or even a family member.

Teens often don't know or understand the dangers of substance abuse. They may see occasional use as being safe and don't believe they could become addicted to drugs or face consequences. They may also assume that they can stop using it if they want to.

### Other risk factors for drug use in teens include:

Family history of substance use, Academic pressure, Adverse childhood events ([ACES](#)), Lack of supervision, [Mental health disorders](#), Peer pressure, Curiosity, Desire to escape (e.g., external situation like home life or internal situation like complex feelings), Social acceptance (e.g., fitting in with peers), Low [self-esteem](#), Increased access to substances, Transitional periods (e.g., starting puberty or attending a new school)

While drug use can lead to mental health disorders, sometimes it's the other way around. Teens may use substances to self-medicate or numb emotional pain.

### What Are the Effects of Using Drugs During Adolescence?

The body sends out a "feel good" chemical called [dopamine](#) when using a substance. This response tells the brain that it is worth using the substance again to get that feeling. As a result, a person starts having cravings for the substance. Addiction happens when cravings don't stop, [withdrawal](#) occurs without the substance, and use continues even when there are negative consequences. Since the physical and mental urge to use is so strong, it becomes very hard to stop using a substance.<sup>12</sup>

Teenagers who misuse substances can experience drug dependence ([substance use disorder](#)). Developmentally, adolescents are at the highest risk for drug dependence and severe addiction.<sup>13</sup>

### Effects on Brain Development and Growth

The human brain continues to develop until about the age of 25.<sup>14</sup> Using substances during adolescence can change brain structure and negatively affect brain functions like learning, processing emotions, and decision-making. It can also lead to the following:<sup>13</sup>

- **More risky behaviors:** Substance abuse makes teens more likely to engage in risky behaviors like unprotected sex (or "condomless sex") or dangerous driving.
- **Higher risk for adult health problems:** Teenagers who abuse substances have a higher risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, and sleep disorders.
- **Mental health disorders:** It is common for teens with substance abuse disorders to have mental health conditions (and vice versa).<sup>15</sup>
- **Impaired academic performance:** Substance use affects a teen's concentration and memory, which may negatively affect their schoolwork.

### What Are the Health Risks of Drug Abuse?

Drug and alcohol use can lead to substance use disorder as well as the specific health risks of the substance being abused.

#### Alcohol

Alcohol use can lead to an increased risk of:<sup>16</sup>

- Liver disease, cirrhosis, and [cancer](#)
- Heart disease and stroke
- Depression
- Lack of focus
- Blackouts
- Accidents
- [Alcohol poisoning](#)
- Increased risky behavior
- Violence
- Suicide

#### Marijuana

Marijuana can impair concentration, worsen mental health, interfere with prescription medications, lead to risky sexual behaviors, or contribute to dangerous driving. Smoking marijuana can also negatively affect lung health.<sup>18</sup>

Marijuana is often thought of as not being "as bad" as other drugs and, in some cases, even good for you. However, marijuana can be harmful to teens because their brains are still developing. Marijuana use in teens is linked to difficulty with problem-solving, memory and learning issues, impaired coordination, and problems with maintaining attention.<sup>19</sup>

**Opioids** Opioids include legal prescription medications such as hydrocodone, oxycontin, and fentanyl, as well as illegal drugs such as heroin. These drugs carry a high risk of overdose and death. The annual rate of opioid overdose deaths for those aged 15 to 24 years is 12.6 per 100,000 people.<sup>212</sup>

#### Over-the-Counter and Prescription Medications

Over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription medications can be misused more easily than others because they're often easy for teens to obtain. Diet pills, caffeine pills, and cold and flu products with

dextromethorphan are just a few examples of OTC substances teens may use. They may also have access to family member's prescriptions for drugs like opiate painkillers and stimulants or get them from friends who do.<sup>10</sup>

There are serious health risks to misusing OTC cold and cough products, including increased blood pressure, loss of consciousness, and overdose. There can also be legal issues if a teen is using someone else's prescriptions.<sup>22</sup>

## **Tobacco**

Tobacco can lead to multiple chronic illnesses, including<sup>23</sup>

- Lung disease
- Cancer
- Diabetes
- Heart disease
- Stroke
- Vision loss
- Decreased fertility

## **E-Cigarettes (Vaping)**

[Vaping](#) is attractive to teens because e-cigarettes are often flavored like fruit, candy, or mint. These products may contain nicotine or other synthetic substances that damage the brain and lungs. The teenage brain is vulnerable to the harmful effects of nicotine, including anxiety and addiction.<sup>12</sup>

E-cigarettes come in a variety of shapes and sizes and might be disguised as everyday items, such as:<sup>24</sup>

- USB Flash Drives
- Pens
- Hoodie (sweatshirt) strings
- Backpacks
- Smartwatches
- Toys (e.g., fidget spinners)
- Phone cases

## **Cocaine**

[Cocaine](#) carries a risk of overdose and withdrawal. It causes decreased impulse control and poor decision-making. Withdrawal symptoms from cocaine include restlessness, paranoia, and irritability. Snorting cocaine can cause nosebleeds and a loss of smell. Using cocaine can lead to heart attacks, lung problems, strokes, respiratory arrest, seizures, and coma.<sup>25</sup>

## **Ecstasy (MDMA)**

Ecstasy is a stimulant that causes an increased heart rate, blurred vision, and nausea. It can also lead to brain swelling, seizures, and organ damage.<sup>26</sup> Ecstasy is also known as:<sup>26</sup>X, XTC, Adam, E, Roll, A, 007, Molly

## **Inhalants**

Inhalants are fumes from gases, glue, aerosols, or solvents that can damage the brain, heart, lungs, kidneys, and liver. Using inhalants even once can lead to overdose, suffocation, seizures, and death.<sup>27</sup>

### **Methamphetamine**

Methamphetamine (crystal meth) is a highly addictive stimulant that has multiple health consequences, including:<sup>28</sup>

- Severe weight loss
- Lack of sleep
- Dental problems
- Skin sores
- Change in brain structure
- Paranoia and hallucinations
- Violence

### **What Are the Signs a Teen Is Using Drugs?**

Behavioral warning signs of drug use in teens include:

- Personality changes
- Paranoia
- Violence
- Irritability
- Difficulty sleeping
- Inappropriate or odd behavior (e.g., laughing randomly)
- Loss of interest in hobbies or extracurricular activities
- Avoiding eye contact
- Acting secretive or like they're hiding something
- Staying out late
- Social withdrawal (e.g., from family, friends)
- Poor academic performance
- Hanging out with new friends or no longer hanging out with their usual friend group
- [Poor hygiene](#)
- Stealing
- Lying
- Skipping school
- Isolation (e.g., staying in their room, refusing family meals)

[Physical signs](#) of drug use in teens may include:

- Red eyes
- Persistent cough
- Dilated pupils
- Increased or decreased energy
- Sleeping all the time or not at all
- Mood swings
- Memory problems
- Talking very fast or slowly
- Runny nose or nosebleeds
- Hoarseness
- Increased/decreased appetite

- Weight loss
- Fatigue
- Blackouts
- Smells like smoke or alcohol (e.g., on clothes, skin, or breath)

### What Are the Four Stages of Drug Addiction?

You should also be aware of the four stages of addiction.<sup>3233</sup> The earlier teen drug use is recognized, the sooner they can get help.

1. **Experimentation:** A teen tries one or more substances. Some teens will only try a substance once. Others will continue to experiment and increase their use.
2. **Regular or “social” use:** A teen begins to use one or more substances regularly. At this stage, they may limit their use to just when they’re with friends or only in situations where they feel it’s needed—e.g., before a test.
3. **Risky use:** A teen continues to use a substance that they have regularly been using, even if it’s caused problems for them at school, at home, and in their relationships. They crave the substance, both physically and mentally. At this stage, the substance has become central to a teen’s life, and they’ll take risks to get and use it.
4. **Dependence and Addiction:** A teen is addicted to a substance, and most of their time and energy is devoted to getting and using it. At this stage, they would need intervention and treatment to quit, as they may not be able to stop on their own, even if they wanted to.

### Drug Addiction Treatment for Teens

Even if the adults in their lives try to prevent it, some teens will develop substance use disorders. Support for teens with drug addiction includes treating withdrawal or underlying mental health conditions, and addressing emotional needs, usually with a qualified mental health professional such as a psychiatrist or psychologist. Treatment for teens experiencing substance use disorder includes a combination of the following: Outpatient clinics, 12-step programs, Inpatient mental health or substance use units, Medications, Therapy (individual, group, or family).

[Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\) National Helpline](#) at 1-800-662-4357 for information on support and treatment facilities in your area.

If you are having suicidal thoughts, dial **988** to contact the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#) and connect with a trained counselor. If you or a loved one are in immediate danger, call **911**.