

**Just
the facts.**

**ANSWERS
TO YOUR
QUESTIONS ABOUT
PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH**

Substance Abuse: Helping Your Teen

Is drug and alcohol abuse really a problem for youth?

Virtually every teenager is exposed to drugs and alcohol use during their high school years. Statistics indicate that over 50% of high school seniors have experimented with illegal drug use. Almost half of American teens drink alcohol weekly, and one third smoke marijuana on a regular basis. The question is not whether teens will be exposed to drug use, but rather how it may affect their lives.

Most adolescents' exposure to drugs may be considered experimental. However, the classification of drug use depends on the frequency of use, the types of drugs taken, and the amount of time and energy consumed in drug-seeking behavior. Patterns of use will reflect one of the following categories: experimental users, recreational users, regular users and addicts.

What should I look for?

While the teenage years are a time of rapid change and some variable moods, parents can be alert to certain signs and symptoms which are associated with substance use. It is difficult to separate typical adolescent behavior from drug induced behavior; however, the following symptoms are warning signs:

- changes in mood and behavior
- deterioration in school performance and grades
- changes in friendships or friends who are no longer known to parents
- unexplained injuries
- deterioration in dress and appearance
- altered or decreased interests
- increased difficulty in communication
- notable increase in conflict with parents or family
- becoming more reclusive or withdrawn

It is important for parents to confront these behaviors and not attempt to deny, minimize or explain away their existence. A loving, concerned family must actively confront these issues and intervene effectively.

Who is at risk?

Exposure to drugs and alcohol is a potential risk for all adolescents, including those who are considered to be "good kids." Those teens who are most susceptible to drug/alcohol abuse include those who are from disrupted families, have other mental health problems, or experience considerable stress in their home or school lives.

History of substance abuse by biological family members also increases risk. High risk teens often have learning problems, self-esteem deficits and a high degree of peer pressure.

Why is it important to get help?

Alcoholism and drug addiction are serious, progressive diseases that can take a life-long toll on a child's health, development, social adjustment and academic and career success. Substance abuse in teens is often accompanied by poor judgment - and an increase in risk-taking behaviors (such as driving while under the influence, indiscriminate sexual activity, fights, etc.) that can lead to injury or even death. It is therefore imperative that parents confront this problem.

What can parents do to help?

The only way to effectively enforce strong rules against drug use is for parents to set a good example. Parents who drink excessively, use drugs, or rely on chemical substances to relax will have difficulty imposing strong standards on their adolescents. The ability to cope with life's stresses in healthy ways is related to parents' modeling those skills.

It is important for parents to monitor their child's activities and be aware of friendship patterns and peer groups. It also helps to maintain family activities and to involve teens as an integral part of the family. Teenagers need to be held accountable for their behavior and should make restitution to remedy mistakes that have been made. Parents should remove temptation by placing limits on activities or locations where drug use is known to occur.

Many families have found that writing and signing drug use contracts have been helpful. These agreements are available through high school counselors and local drug prevention programs.

How can a psychologist help with substance abuse?

Psychologists trained in alcohol and drug abuse treatment issues have the expertise to evaluate a young person's using behavior and recommend treatments geared to the type and severity of the problem. Both inpatient and outpatient programs make use of education, assistance through physical and psychological withdrawal, confronting denial, and addressing underlying problems such as low self-esteem, unresolved trauma experiences, academic difficulties, or other mental health problems. Therapy and support groups lend hope, encouragement and an alternative peer group for young people working on changing their using behaviors. Individual and family psychotherapy can be very helpful in rebuilding a teen's health and family harmony.

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