

Let's discuss...

Youth and Drug Use

We live in a complex, highly stressed world that is filled with mixed messages. As a result, it's not always easy for today's youth to understand and cope with their surroundings.

Young people are often told that tobacco, alcohol and other drugs are dangerous. Yet some of the adults around them may use these substances to manage stress or when socializing. In the media, substance use is sometimes linked to death. At other times, it's linked to fun and presented as "normal" adult behaviour. This confusion over the benefits and harms of substance use can add more stress to a young person's life.

What kind of pressures do young people face?

Teens face many pressures and influences. This can make growing up very difficult for some young people.

Some of the pressures come from parents and school. Others come from friends, music, the media and the internet.

Often these pressures result in teens feeling they need to be everything to everybody: smart, athletic, outgoing, popular, slim, sexy, fun, and so on.

Some forms of pressure and stress can motivate a young person to follow their passions and fulfill their dreams. But too much pressure (or the wrong kind of influences) can cause some young people to crumble. Stress is one of the reasons some teens may use drugs.

Besides stress, what are other reasons teens use alcohol and other drugs?

Most teens *first* try alcohol or other drugs for the experience. They may have heard about a drug and are curious about how it will affect their thinking and behaviour. Many teens believe they can safely try a drug a few times without getting hurt.



.....
“Many teens believe they can safely try a drug a few times without getting hurt.”

There are many reasons why a teen might use drugs recreationally or even regularly:

- They have **no reason not to**. (There's no sport, hobby or long-term goal that is affected by their substance use.)
- They're **bored** and don't know how to get "un-bored."
- They feel socially isolated and **have trouble relaxing** around people their age.
- Their friends use drugs and they **want to feel like they belong in the group**.

Facts about BC teens

According to the McCreary Centre's 2003 Youth Addiction Survey

- 37% of students aged 14 and younger have used alcohol. (67% of 15- and 16-year-olds, and 79% of students 17 and older, have used alcohol.)
- 44% of teens who have used alcohol report binge drinking (having more than 5 drinks in a row in a short period of time) in the last month.
- 21% of teens report being current users of marijuana (5% are frequent users, and 7% are heavy users).

Is there a relationship between teen drug use and mental health disorders?

Studies show that some teens use drugs to help them cope with or mask their anxiety or depression. But it also works the other way around. Using drugs can lead to or worsen emotional problems in a teen who may be vulnerable to mental health disorders (because of a personal or family history of mental disorders).

Problem substance use (for example, binge drinking in order to get drunk) among teens is often linked to disruptive behaviour disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and conduct disorder.

Are some teens at greater risk of problem substance use than others?

Street-involved youth tend to have much higher rates of substance use. This is also true for Aboriginal youth and young people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or questioning their sexual orientation.

Personality is also a factor. Some teens (and adults) are more prone to risk-taking than others.

What will happen if a teen uses drugs?

The earlier a child begins using alcohol and other drugs, the more likely they are to develop substance-related problems later on in life.

It is especially dangerous for a teen under 16 years old to use substances. Alcohol and other drugs can impair their physical, mental and emotional development. Older teens—those between 16 and 19—may be

able to experiment with drugs with less risk of harm. But because they are not fully grown, they cannot safely consume the same amount as adults.

Binge drinking and binge drugging (using a lot quantity of drug in a short time) put teens at risk of short-term harms. These include falls, accidents, violent encounters and unwanted sexual activity.

Repeated use of a drug can, after time, lead to **tolerance**. This means the teen needs an increasing amount of a drug to get the same effects. Continued use can also lead to **dependence**. This means they feel they need the drug to feel normal and to cope with challenges in their daily life.

Long-term heavy substance use can lead to a variety of health issues. It can also lead to problems with employment and relationships.

When a young person is bingeing on or regularly using a drug, it could be a sign that something is troubling them. It could also mean that they've been using a drug for so long that it has become a habit. They may need help to break their habit.

Are 'legal drugs' as dangerous for teens as illegal drugs?

Legal substances are no safer than illegal substances. For example, smoking cigarettes is legal (for adults). Yet smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in Canada. Tobacco is also linked to risky behaviour. Teens who smoke are more likely than other teens to experiment with alcohol, cannabis (marijuana), ecstasy and many other substances.

Young smokers are also far more likely to engage in risky behaviours such as getting drunk or having unprotected sex.

What are some ways to prevent a teen from developing a drug problem?

Drug prevention starts early and at home. Parents and caregivers can begin by revisiting their own substance use patterns. Children often develop substance use patterns similar to those of the adults in their lives.

Parents and caregivers can also help by being open, loving and attentive. Young people who know they're loved have more confidence and a stronger sense of self-worth. They can handle peer pressure better. And they're better able to overcome problems at school and at home.



What to do if you or someone you know has a problem with drugs

Sometimes love and attention won't be enough to prevent a teen from developing a substance use problem. If a teen you know is struggling, call the **Alcohol and Drug Information and Referral Service** at 1-800-663-1441 (toll-free in BC) or 604-660-9382 (in Greater Vancouver). Or you can call the Kelty Resource Centre at 1-800-665-1822 (toll-free in BC) or 604-875-2084 (in Greater Vancouver) for information and support for the children, youth and their families including substance use and addictions. You can also check out the HeretoHelp website for more information on how to help your teen.



**BC Partners for
Mental Health and
Addictions Information**

The BC Partners are a group of nonprofit agencies working together to help individuals and families manage mental health and substance use problems, with the help of good quality information. We represent Anxiety Disorders Association of BC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Centre for Addiction Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kid's Mental Health, Jessie's Hope Society, and Mood Disorders Association of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Addiction Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority. Produced by Centre for Addictions Research of BC.