

FAQs for Teens

Teen Substance Use: Drinking, Smoking, Vaping, and Using Drugs

Frequently Asked Questions

What is substance use?

Substance use includes drinking alcohol and smoking or chewing tobacco. It also includes using certain types of drugs, such as

- e-cigarettes (vaping)
- marijuana, including smoking, vaping, or eating (edibles)
- inhalants (inhaling fumes from common household products, such as spray paints, markers, glues, and cleaning fluids)
- illegal drugs, such as cocaine, crack, speed, heroin, LSD, ecstasy, and synthetic drugs like “bath salts”
- legal drugs with opioid-like effects, such as kratom
- prescription medications, if you
 - use them in a way your doctor did not prescribe
 - use a family member or friend’s medications, such as pills meant to help with pain or ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder)

Why is substance use dangerous?

Substance use is risky, especially for teens. Substance use can

- get in the way of school and relationships
- affect brain development

Substance use also can lead to

- other risky behaviors, like unprotected and unplanned sex, or driving while drunk or high
- violence, self-harm, and suicide
- overdose
- mood disorders, such as anxiety and [depression](#)
- health problems later in life, such as heart disease and stroke, [high blood pressure](#), cancers, and sleep disorders
- other types of substance use and possible addictions

Why is substance use especially dangerous for teens?

Your brain goes through an intense period of development during your teen years. The last part of the brain to develop controls your judgment, emotions, impulse control, and decision making. Until this part of your brain is fully mature, you are more likely to be harmed by drug use. The brain typically continues maturing until your mid-20s.

This means that any substance use can damage teen brains more than adult brains. For example, studies have shown that teens who use marijuana often may have a loss of IQ that does not come back, even if they quit later in life. (IQ is a measure of intelligence.)

What substance use is illegal for teens?

There are many laws about substance use in the United States:

- Drinking alcohol is illegal until you are 21.
- Buying tobacco products, including e-cigarettes, is illegal until you are 21.

- Marijuana is legal in some states. In all states where marijuana is legal, you must be 21 or older to have or use it. Marijuana is still illegal under federal law.
- Sharing prescription drugs is illegal. This includes taking pills that were prescribed for your parents or another family member.
- Drugs like cocaine, heroin, and meth are illegal for everyone.

What is addiction?

Some people who use substances develop an addiction. Addiction changes how your brain works, so you get less pleasure from everyday things like food. Addiction also changes your ability to learn, remember, make decisions, and manage stress. These changes make it harder to stop taking the substance, even if you want to.

Is marijuana addictive?

Yes, marijuana is addictive. About 1 in 3 people who use marijuana may have some degree of marijuana use disorder. And people who begin using marijuana before the age of 18 are four to seven times more likely to develop a marijuana use disorder than adults.

With a marijuana use disorder, you may have certain symptoms when you try to stop using marijuana. Symptoms include

- feeling annoyed easily
- having trouble sleeping
- having cravings for marijuana
- feeling restless

Severe cases of marijuana use disorder are known as addiction. With addiction, a person has trouble stopping use of a substance even though it causes problems with relationships, work, or school.

What should I know about vaping cigarettes or marijuana?

With vaping, you use a device such as an e-cigarette or vape pen. These devices contain a liquid that is heated and turned into vapor. You breathe in the vapor. The vapor usually

contains **nicotine** or marijuana, flavoring, and other chemicals.

There is still much we don't know about the long-term health effects of vaping. But it is known that vaping nicotine or marijuana has similar risks to smoking, including

- effects on brain development
- problems with learning, memory, and attention
- higher risk of addiction to nicotine, marijuana, or other drugs later in life
- lung damage
- heart disease

The chemicals in e-cigarette vapor also can be harmful. These chemicals include cancer-causing chemicals, heavy metals like lead, and flavorings that may cause lung disease. Also, research shows young people who use e-cigarettes may be more likely to start smoking cigarettes in the future.

Is vaping safer than smoking?

No, vaping is not safer than smoking. Vaping can damage the lungs over a short period of time. The most serious vaping conditions are linked to a serious type of lung injury. Teens should not vape or smoke.

What should I know about medical marijuana?

Medical marijuana is the use of marijuana that is prescribed by a doctor. There have been almost no studies of medical marijuana in children and teens.

Currently there is only one medication made from marijuana that has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). This is a CBD medication that may help with certain kinds of seizures. CBD is a marijuana extract that does not cause a high.

Different states have different laws about medical marijuana. Some states allow the use of medical marijuana or CBD, but only for adults. In some states, children of any age can get medical marijuana if they have a qualifying medical condition.

In most states that allow medical marijuana, the marijuana is not regulated. That means it may not be checked for ingredients, purity, strength or safety.

How can I get help with addiction?

If you need help to quit unhealthy substances, you can get counseling and treatment. Talk with your parents, a teacher, school counselor, doctor, or other health care professional. For more information about places that can help, see the [Resources](#) section below.

Glossary

Depression: Feelings of sadness for periods of at least 2 weeks.

High Blood Pressure: Blood pressure above the normal level. Also called hypertension.

Nicotine: An addictive drug found in tobacco.

Resources

SmokeFree Teen

Text QUIT to 47848

<https://teen.smokefree.gov>

Advice and tools for quitting smoking from the National Cancer Institute.

National Institute on Drug Abuse for Teens

<https://teens.drugabuse.gov>

Information on teen drug use and its effects from the National Institute on Drug Abuse for Teens.

American Lung Association

[800-586-4872](tel:800-586-4872)

www.lung.org

Education, support, and programs related to tobacco use and lung disease.

Alcoholics Anonymous

[212-870-3400](tel:212-870-3400)

www.aa.org

Education and local support groups for quitting drinking.

Narcotics Anonymous

[818-773-9999](tel:818-773-9999)

www.na.org

Education and local support groups for quitting drug use.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

24-hour Treatment Referral Line: [800-662-HELP \(4357\)](tel:800-662-HELP(4357))

www.samhsa.gov

Treatment locator and referral line from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

If you have further questions, contact your ob-gyn.

Don't have an ob-gyn? [Learn how to find a doctor near you.](#)

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