

What parents need to know about drugs

Most commonly used drugs and their effects

For many people, the term “drug” tends to suggest illegal activity. However, the use of tobacco and alcohol is legal for people over the age of 18 or 19 (depending on the province), and medicines are legal when prescribed or available over the counter.

Alcohol and tobacco are the drugs that young people are most likely to try, and cannabis is the most widely used illegal drug in Canada.

The short-term and long-term effects of these drugs are described below.

Alcohol (depressant)

The term “alcohol” refers to substances made by fermenting or distilling grains or fruits; for example, wine, beer and hard liquor. Alcohol is the most popular drug in most provinces of Canada.

Short-term effects may include

- depresses the central nervous system (CNS)
- relaxation and feelings of well-being, but in some cases depression and anger
- increased activity and decreased inhibition
- drowsiness, dizziness, slurred speech and loss of coordination and concentration
- in extreme cases, loss of consciousness and even death

Long-term effects may include

- damage to the stomach lining, ulcers, decreased appetite and malnutrition
- liver damage, cirrhosis of the liver
- blackouts (periods when the person is conscious and functioning but is later unable to recall what they did or said)
- brain damage that causes problems with memory, judgment and abstract thinking
- increased risk of hemorrhagic stroke
- impotence in men and infertility in women
- cancer of the mouth and throat, as well as other types of cancer
- heavy use can lead to dependence.

Tobacco (stimulant) is usually smoked but can also be chewed.

Short-term effects may include

- stimulates the central nervous system (CNS)
- feelings of pleasure, stimulation and relaxation
- increased heartbeat, blood pressure and blood sugar
- irritations of the throat and lungs (coughing)
- reduced appetite and endurance

Long-term effects may include

- heart disease, strokes, emphysema, chronic bronchitis and aneurysms
- cancer of the lung, throat, stomach, bladder, kidney and pancreas
- physical and psychological addiction*, with significant withdrawal symptoms

Cannabis (marihuana)

Cannabis (marihuana) is the most widely used illegal drug in Canada. It is a moodaltering drug that comes from the Cannabis sativa plant. People use it in three forms: marihuana (the dried and ground bud of the plant), hash or hashish oil/weed oil.

The cannabis high comes from the chemical THC. The cannabis that was smoked in the sixties and seventies was much less potent than it is today. With the improvement in horticulture and growing techniques, the concentration of THC in cannabis today has increased substantially.

Short-term effects may include

- feelings of calmness and relaxation, as well as clumsiness and slowed-down reactions, drowsiness
- giddiness, talkativeness or quiet seriousness
- heightened senses
- forgetfulness and reduced ability to concentrate
- distorted sense of space and time increased heart rate and changes in blood pressure
- increased appetite
- anxiety, occasionally panic attacks and/ or paranoia (suspicious feelings)

Long-term effects may include

- decreased motivation and interest, as well as difficulties with memory and concentration
- chronic coughing and lung infections
- cancer (As a result of the heavy use of pesticides and fertilizer in indoor grow-ops, the tar in cannabis smoke contains much higher amounts of cancer-producing agents than tar in tobacco smoke.)
- psychological and physical dependence can occur among heavy or regular users.

Less commonly used drugs and their effects

Other illegal drugs, such as those described below, are much less commonly used by young people in Canada.

Amphetamines and methamphetamines (stimulants)

Amphetamines are a large group of stimulant drugs. They can be powders (ranging in colour from white to brown, or even purple), pills or liquids. Amphetamines stimulate the central nervous system. Their effects are similar; however, the intensity will vary with the drug and the manner in which it is taken.

Methamphetamine is a powerful member of the amphetamine family that comes in many different formulations dating back to the late 1880s. The popularity of methamphetamine has come and gone over the years. Recently a new form of methamphetamine has emerged worldwide. Although it is the same drug, it is now much more potent. Methamphetamine comes in powder or crystal form. Crystal meth, a colourless crystalline solid, is a form of methamphetamine that is mostly smoked.

Methamphetamine is highly addictive. Addiction to methamphetamine is treatable, although it can be a long process and relapse is common.

Short-term effects may include

- stimulates the central nervous system (CNS)
- feelings of well-being, increased alertness and energy
- increased heart rate and breathing rate, increased body temperature
- “twitching”, teeth grinding and obsession with performing repetitive tasks such as cleaning, hand-washing or assembling and disassembling objects
- irritability, insomnia, confusion, hallucinations, anxiety, paranoia (suspicious feelings) and increased aggression

Long-term effects may include

- loss of muscle control with symptoms similar to Parkinson’s Disease
- severe paranoia (suspicious feelings) and severe depression
- black teeth and gums, ashen skin and repellent body odour

Club drugs

The most commonly used club drugs at the time of publication are ketamine (Special K), GHB, methamphetamine and ecstasy. It is important to know that the so-called club drugs are not just confined to the dance club scene. The dangers of these drugs include a strong likelihood that they have not been properly manufactured, and in the case of GHB and ecstasy, the fact that they cannot be safely used in combination with alcohol.

Ketamine is used as an anesthetic in medicine and by veterinarians as a tranquillizer on large animals. It is similar to PCP (angel dust) and creates a dissociative effect, causing the user to experience loss of identity and distorted perception of time. The user can also suffer from hallucinations and exhibit psychotic behaviour.

Short-term effects may include

- feelings of relaxation and sedation
- at higher doses, distorted perceptions, confusion and blackouts

Long-term effects may include

- addiction
- (in high doses) delirium, amnesia, high blood pressure, depression and breathing problems
- becoming withdrawn, paranoid and very uncoordinated

GHB

A sedative hypnotic originally developed as a sleep aid, is an odourless and colourless liquid mixed in water or provided in the form of a white powder. Effects are felt in about 10 to 20 minutes and can last up to four hours. GHB makes the user feel very drunk but is out of the system in 24 to 48 hours.

Short-term effects may include

feelings of relaxation and happiness, and increased sociability (similar to the effects of alcohol)

Long-term effects may include

- (in high doses) dizziness, drowsiness, nausea, vomiting, headaches, loss of consciousness, loss of reflexes, impaired breathing and even death
- physical dependence
- withdrawal symptoms such as insomnia, anxiety, tremors and sweating

Ecstasy

Ecstasy is a powerful stimulant that is chemically related to methamphetamine. “E,” as it is known, is almost always found in tablet form and is taken orally. Ecstasy has a euphoric effect and raises the energy level of the user, which makes it attractive to the dance culture. It also has some hallucinogenic effects. Ecstasy is sold in coloured tablets that are usually imprinted with some form of caricature or logo. This is a marketing technique used to attract youth. Unfortunately, users may mistakenly view these drugs as being safe because they come in the form of pills or tablets. It is very rare to find a pure ecstasy tablet for sale. It is more common to see other less expensive drugs such as methamphetamine, ketamine or GHB contained in a single tablet. This places the user at risk of a potentially dangerous drug interaction.

Short-term effects may include

- feelings of euphoria, pleasure, empathy and sociability, but also confusion, depression, sleep problems, anxiety and panic attacks
- blurred vision, nausea, muscle tension, teeth grinding
- faintness, chills, sweating; increased heart rate and blood pressure, elevated body temperature
- (in high doses) distortions in perception, thinking and memory, as well as hallucinations
- death from dehydration and hypothermia in the context of raves or dances

Long-term effects may include

- weight loss
- irreversible brain damage with symptoms similar to the early onset of Alzheimer’s disease
- flashbacks, paranoia (suspicious feelings), depression and psychosis (severe mental illness)
- liver damage

Hallucinogens

Hallucinogens , the best known of which is LSD, are drugs that act on the central nervous system to greatly affect the way one feels and thinks. These drugs typically take the form of tablets or capsules containing powder of any colour but can also be in the form of magic mushrooms (psilocybin).

Short-term effects may include

- mood swings from euphoria to sadness or fear, and back again
- changes to the senses (the way you see, hear, taste and touch) and hallucinations (at higher doses)
- increased heartbeat and blood pressure, dizziness, upset stomach, numbness of the mouth, nausea, anxiety and shivering

Long-term effects may include

- flashbacks
- psychosis (severe mental illness) in vulnerable users
- possible psychological dependence in chronic users

Solvents/Inhalants

Common household products such as quick-drying glues, gasoline, nail polish remover, paint thinner and cleaning fluids contain solvents that are commonly abused. Gas propellants in aerosol products like hairsprays and air fresheners are also inhaled.

Short-term effects may include

- euphoria, dizziness, numbness and weightlessness
- decreased motor coordination, muscle weakness, slowed reflexes, impaired judgment, visual impairment, ringing in the ears
- bloodshot, watery eyes
- increased heart rate, irregular heartbeat, headaches
- sneezing, coughing, nasal inflammation, respiratory depression, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea
- (if inhaled for a long period of time) coma or seizures, unconsciousness and brain damage
- death from asphyxiation (suffocation)

Long-term effects may include

- psychological problems such as apathy, mood swings, depression and paranoia (suspicious feelings)
- blood abnormalities and damage to the liver, kidneys, lungs and heart

Cocaine (stimulant)

Cocaine is a fine, white crystalline powder, often diluted with other substances, that is sniffed, smoked or sometimes injected. It comes in two forms: 1) cocaine hydrochloride, a drug that is sniffed in powder form, and 2) crack cocaine, a cocaine-based substance that is smoked.

Short-term effects may include

- a sense of excitement, extra energy and confidence, and an elevated tolerance for pain
- decreased appetite, dilated pupils, sweating and paleness
- increased heartbeat and breathing

Long-term effects may include

- chronic snorting causes runny or bleeding noses and holes in the barrier separating the nostrils
- depression, restlessness, sleeping, eating and sexual problems
- chronic, heavy cocaine use can cause severe psychiatric disorders

Heroin (depressant)

Heroin is a drug derived from morphine, which is derived from the opium poppy. It is most often injected but can also be sniffed, smoked or swallowed.

Short-term effects may include

- an intense feeling of well-being or euphoria, numbness and pain relief

- nausea, vomiting and severe itching
- “nodding” or alternating between a wakeful and drowsy state
- overdose is a common cause of death

Long-term effects may include

- collapsed veins and risk of contracting hepatitis, HIV and other infections from the use of needles
- malnutrition, chronic constipation
- addiction can lead to serious personal problems often involving crime, theft and poverty

Prescription drugs

Improper use of prescription medications and over-the-counter preparations is a serious concern. Many prescription drugs are powerful, and some can be addictive. The results of misusing these drugs, especially in combination with alcohol or illegal drugs, could be deadly.

Our society today is used to taking medications to make us feel better. Children see this, and can develop the attitude that “pills are OK because they make us feel better” or “medicine can’t be bad for us.” (This may also be one reason club drugs like ecstasy are often made to look like pills or capsules.)

It is important to have an open discussion with your child about the harm that can come from improper use of these medications. There are some standard safety practices that can help keep them safe:

- Always read and understand all warnings and instructions for medications. Take only as directed by your doctor.
- Younger children should never take medication without supervision by a parent or doctor.
- Never share your prescription with anyone.
- Never accept medication from anyone else. A pill may look safe, but you have no idea what it truly is or how your body may react to the ingredients. There is a great risk of allergic reaction or drug interaction that could be deadly.
- If you are not sure or have questions, ask your doctor or pharmacist.

Risks of drug use

The World Health Organization has identified substance abuse as a major health risk that can directly cause illness or even death as well as contribute to risky behaviour and harmful outcomes such as unsafe sexual practices, accidents, violence and loss of productivity.

Risks to mind and body

- People who misuse or abuse drugs tend to be sick more often, less coordinated and more prone to accidents.
- Street drugs pose a physical threat as well as a legal one, in that there are no controls on the quality, content, safety or strength of drugs being sold this way.
- Drugs can cause extreme mood changes, confused thinking, poor judgment and other problems with a person’s mental health.
- In extreme cases, users can develop personality disturbances, learning problems, memory loss and addiction. A significant number of drug users die each year.

Risks to family, friends and community

- Drugs can strain social relationships, putting life at home, school and work at risk.
- Drug use may lead to early sexual activity, unplanned or unwanted sex, and other risky behaviour.
- The need to support an addiction can lead to crime.
- Illegal sale or possession of drugs can dramatically affect a young person’s future. Drug users may be expelled from school. If charged and convicted, they will have a criminal record that may present problems in the future with potential employers or when travelling out of the country, etc.
- Drug use can affect the health and safety of a young person’s friends and siblings, for example, if they drink and drive, or smoke around others.
- Meeting the demand for drugs also creates social problems. For example, children whose parents are involved in the production of drugs are at risk.

Reasons young people might use drugs

Young people who use drugs may do so because they

- are curious about the effects and want to try experiencing the “high”
- want to relieve boredom or seek out a new risk
- think it is something to do for fun or to be cool
- are influenced by their friends and want to fit in
- have a risk-taking personality
- need to relieve stress or escape from painful feelings
- are motivated by rebellion, or have difficulty dealing with feelings or aggression
- are trying to get their parent’s attention
- lack self-confidence or have learning difficulties
- are trying to relieve physical pain

Each case is unique. Some young people might use drugs for one of the reasons listed above. Others may be responding to a combination of several different issues or problems.

Are any of the issues listed above likely to affect your child? If you can identify specific areas of risk, you may wish to discuss them with your child.

The reasons for using drugs can be temporary. A child may use drugs to cope during a crisis or while going through a difficult time and then stop when the problems get resolved or go away. They may experiment once or twice and decide that the experience is not for them. Or they may use drugs over a longer period of time. The risk of developing a dependency increases the more that a young person begins to rely on alcohol or drugs to help manage their emotions or experiences.

Signs and symptoms that may indicate drug use

A combination of several of the following signs is a good indication that something is wrong. If you observe several of the following signs, consider taking your child to see a medical doctor or counsellor. If your child demonstrates certain signs and symptoms that suggest drug use, be aware of other possible explanations and avoid jumping to conclusions.

At home

- changes in sleeping and eating patterns: insomnia, napping at inappropriate times, fatigue, sudden increase or decrease in appetite
- changes in physical appearance: red or watery eyes, pupils dilated or constricted; runny or irritated nose; coughing; headaches; slurred speech; less care given to grooming; weight loss
- significantly increased use of strong cologne, mouthwash or eye drops
- changes in emotions and behaviour: moodiness, depression, hostility, hypersensitivity, lying, secretiveness, giggling for no apparent reason
- difficulty following instructions or concentrating, showing confusion
- avoiding contact with you: going straight to their room or the bathroom when arriving home
- excessive secrecy or “guarded” behaviour (for example, always leaving the room to take calls on their cell phone or quickly shutting down e-mail or instant message accounts when you enter the room)
- possession of drug paraphernalia, and presence of strange odours or cover-up odours
- over-the-counter drugs disappearing from the family’s medicine cabinet

School, friends and extracurricular activities

- changes in school performance: lower grades, lateness, absenteeism, discipline problems
- loss of interest in sports, hobbies and activities that the young person previously enjoyed
- presence of new or different friends, including friends who are reluctant to meet parents
- defending a known drug user
- requests for more spending money
- seem to have increasing amounts of unaccountable money of their own
- receiving expensive gifts from friends

Tip If you suspect that your child is using alcohol or other drugs or you see a pattern of change in their behavior that concerns you, talk to them. Tell them you are concerned and explain why. If drug use ends up being the problem, help is available. And remember, as a parent, you can see a counsellor yourself to help you figure things out and find new ways of reaching your teen. Talk to an addiction or mental health counsellor, your family physician or a member of the clergy for help and support as well as advice on programs and resources in your area.