

How bad is my teen's drinking or drug use?

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IT'S SO HARD TO THINK about your son or daughter drinking or using other drugs. It's easy to panic and assume the worst. Not all teens who use drugs continue to do so or have their lives fall apart because of their use. Not all kids who drink develop drinking problems. In fact, most don't.

We know you are concerned. You might also be feeling scared, worried and unsure about what to do next. You probably have a lot of questions, too. Is my son addicted? Is my daughter's use a problem? Does my teen need help to stop?

Some parents also feel like their kid's drug use is somehow their fault. Lots of parents have these feelings—you are not alone. Even with the best parenting, young people ultimately make their own choices, both healthy and unhealthy. Their unhealthy choices don't make you a bad parent.

This brochure will help you to understand how alcohol and other drug problems develop—usually over a period of time. It will explain how someone's use of alcohol or other drugs can progress from not being a problem to actual addiction.

When does use become harmful? Understanding the stages of alcohol or other drug use

Experimental use

Not every teen who uses alcohol or other drugs has a problem. Some kids experiment with various drugs, including alcohol, and decide "this is not for me." Maybe they don't like the feeling or maybe the pros are outweighed by the cons (cost of the drugs, fear of getting caught with the drugs, friends don't think it's cool, etc.). So, they stop.

This experimentation isn't limited to teens. Some adults continue to experiment with drugs, too. Maybe they try smoking marijuana at a party or maybe they snort a line

of cocaine to see what it feels like. Bottom line? They try it to see if they like it or because they are curious, just like your kids do.


Parents are often very concerned when their teens experiment. If your son or daughter is willing, it can be a good time to visit a counsellor to find out about the drugs the teen is using. The counsellor will give you the facts about the drugs and help both of you understand the choices you are making. If your teen doesn't want to go, you can go alone. The counsellor will help you see what you can do, at least to help yourself. Usually, this will also help your teen.

Social use

Some teens like the feeling of being high or like having a couple of drinks now and again. They can choose when they use and stop when they want to. When they use, they don't have a lot of negative consequences—they don't blow off school, they don't get in trouble with the law and they aren't spending all their money on alcohol or other drugs. Basically, they use once in awhile and consider their use to be "social."

Harmful involvement

Some kids get more involved with using alcohol and other drugs. Using becomes the focus of what they do when they party or hang out with others. They start to have problems with friends, family, school and work because of their use. They might spend a lot of their money on alcohol or other drugs. They may no longer be feeling good about their use.



When teens use despite the problems it creates, they might be considered harmfully involved with drugs. The good news is they can turn it around.

Dependency

Some teens actually become addicted or dependent on alcohol or other drugs. At this stage, their body is physically hooked on the drug and they might even need it to feel normal. When they quit drinking or using, they often experience hangovers that can range from quite mild to very severe.

It's also possible to develop "psychological dependence" on the drug, meaning that the users think they function better when they are high or that they need a drink to face certain situations or people.

When teens are addicted, they almost always need help to stop using.

How do I know where my teen's use fits and how do I help them to see it?

It's important to remember that drug problems usually develop over time. Nobody actually sets out to become an alcoholic. Most kids don't think they will get hooked on drugs. That's why using scare tactics or talking about worst-case scenarios with young people isn't very effective. They don't see themselves among the group that will get hooked or experience serious consequences. They don't think it will happen to them.

It's much more effective to talk honestly and openly with teens about drinking and other drug use. Help them understand that most people who end up hooked don't think they'll end up that way. Talk with them about how use progresses from one stage to the next and how to recognize the warning signs that their use is getting out of hand.

One of the main differences between having a problem and not having a problem has to do with loss of control. People who use alcohol and other drugs socially are able to stop when they want to. They can stop before they run out of money, run out of drugs, or have passed out from using or drinking too much.

Another key indicator of a problem is when your son or daughter continues to use even though lots of problems are a result of use. In other words, drinking or drugging is getting in the way of living. For more information on how to know if use is a problem or not, read the companion piece in this series. It's called "Helping teens evaluate their drug use."

Previous arguments or disagreements about drug use may have damaged your relationship with your son or daughter. You can get it back but it will take time and patience. Don't stop trying to reach your teen.

For more information

We understand that everyone's needs are different. Whether you want to prevent your child from using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs, or you want to help your child deal with a drug problem, we can help. Information and prevention programs, group and family counselling, outpatient and residential treatment, and the Protection of Children Abusing Drugs program are offered by Alberta Health Services and its funded services to help your child and your family.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.

Activity Page

The following descriptions and checklists can be used during a discussion with your teen. The idea is for your son or daughter to recognize their own level of use as you talk together about the stages. Your role is to help your kid explore their use rather than having to accept your idea of where they fit. To start, it might be helpful to look at the stages and decide together where you would place others that you know.

No use

Most people are born into the world in a state of “no use.” The exception is babies born to addicted mothers. Some people choose to remain non-users.

You would most likely be in this stage if

- you never use alcohol or other drugs
- you have made a conscious choice not to use (health reasons, religious reasons, etc.)

Experimental use

Many people experiment with alcohol and other drugs. They do this for a variety of reasons, often to see what it is like. Experimentation can happen at any age—adults can experiment, too. Some people don’t like the feeling of being drunk or high, so they stop. Others don’t like the consequences of use (hangovers, spending money, feeling out of control, etc.) so they choose not to use again.

You would most likely be in this stage if

- you use a drug because you are curious and you want to know what it feels like to be high
- you use alcohol or other drugs because your friends are using and you want to fit in, so you try it
- you like to take risks and you think that taking drugs is one way to do this, so you experiment

If you are in this stage, you may have some questions. A counsellor can give you information about the drugs that you are using. If you prefer, you can pick up written information that gives you the facts about alcohol and other drugs. Then, you can make an informed choice about whether or not you want to continue using a particular drug.

Social use

Social users are able to use occasionally and stop when they want to. They are able to remain in control; they don’t use more than they intended. They might disappoint someone

because they overindulge on one occasion, but they don’t continue to do so time after time. In other words, they can use without continued negative consequences. Many Canadians are social users of alcohol. They use once in awhile without experiencing ongoing problems because of their use.

You would most likely be in this stage if

- your use of alcohol or other drugs is not creating ongoing problems for you
- you can always stop when you want to
- you don’t end up using more than you intended to

Harmful involvement

Harmfully involved users are not yet physically hooked on alcohol or other drugs, but they are often using heavily. Sometimes using is the focus of how they spend their free time—getting ready for the party, going to the party, recovering from the party. People who are harmfully involved are almost always experiencing problems in their life because of their use.

You would most likely be in this stage if

- other people are expressing concern about your use
- you are using drugs to relieve boredom or stress or to escape from your feelings
- your school or job performance is being negatively affected by your use
- you are losing friends because of the things you do when drunk or high
- you are spending a lot of money on alcohol or other drugs
- you feel guilty or embarrassed because of your use
- you spend a lot of time thinking about drinking or using

For alcohol, one of the signs of harmful involvement is experiencing “blackouts.” A blackout is not passing out. A blackout happens when someone drinks, and later is unable to remember certain periods of time following the drinking. The person appears to be functioning normally, yet the next day may not remember what happened at the party, or how they got home, for example.

If you are in the harmful involvement stage, your use could be described as a problem. The good news is that you can turn it around. You can learn to reduce your use or use more responsibly as long as you are not yet dependent on the drug.

Dependency

Users who are dependent are physically addicted to the alcohol or other drugs. Often, they are not able to stop using when they want to. Addicted users often experience hangovers or crashes when they are coming off of the alcohol or other drugs. Sometimes they feel like they need the drug or the alcohol to feel normal. Users who are addicted are almost always experiencing problems in their lives as a result of their use.

You are most likely in this stage if

- you experience hangover symptoms after using— things like headaches, upset stomach, vomiting, diarrhea, excessive thirst, shakes, mood swings, changes in appetite, changes in how you sleep. Your hangover symptoms are probably more severe than they used to be.
- you are a drinker who experiences blackouts (loss of memory). They are likely happening more often or lasting longer.
- you think you don't function as well without alcohol or other drugs
- you feel that you can face the day or certain situations better if you have a drink or a toke or a line
- you continue to experience problems as a result of your use
- parents, friends and others are continuing to express concern because of your use
- you are feeling guilt, embarrassment, remorse, shame or depression because of your use

If you are in this stage, you will probably need help to stop using.

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