

Is Your Teen Using? Signs and Symptoms of Substance Abuse

There's no easy way to figure out if your teen is using drugs or alcohol. As you'll see, many of the signs and symptoms of teen substance abuse listed below are also, at times, typical adolescent behavior. Many are also symptoms of mental health issues, including depression or anxiety disorders.

If you've noticed any of the changes related to substance abuse listed below, don't be afraid to come right out and ask your teen direct questions like "Have you been offered drugs?" If yes, "What did you do?" or "Have you been drinking or using drugs?" While no parent wants to hear a "yes" response to these questions, be prepared for it. Decide, in advance, how you'll respond to a "yes". Make sure you reassure your child that you're looking out for him or her, and that you only want the best for his or her future.

Of course, not all teens are going to fess up to drug or alcohol use, and a "no" could also mean your child is in need of help for mental health issues. That's why experts strongly recommend that you consider getting a professional assessment of your child with a pediatrician or child psychologist to find out what's going on. In the case of teen substance abuse, don't be afraid to err on the side of caution. Teaming up with professionals to help your teen is the best way to make sure he or she has a healthy future.

Personal Appearance

- Messy, shows lack of caring for appearance
- Poor hygiene
- Red, flushed cheeks or face
- Track marks on arms or legs (or long sleeves in warm weather to hide marks)
- Burns or soot on fingers or lips (from "joints" or "roaches" burning down)

Personal Habits or Actions

- Clenching teeth
- Smell of smoke or other unusual smells on breath or on clothes
- Chewing gum or mints to cover up breath
- Heavy use of over-the-counter preparations to reduce eye reddening, nasal irritation, or bad breath
- Frequently breaks curfew
- Cash flow problems
- Reckless driving, car accidents, or unexplained dents in the car
- Avoiding eye contact
- Locked doors
- Going out every night
- Secretive phone calls
- "Munchies" or sudden appetite

Behavioral Issues Associated with Teen Substance Abuse

- Change in relationships with family members or friends

- Loss of inhibitions
- Mood changes or emotional instability
- Loud, obnoxious behavior
- Laughing at nothing
- Unusually clumsy, stumbling, lack of coordination, poor balance
- Sullen, withdrawn, depressed
- Unusually tired
- Silent, uncommunicative
- Hostility, anger, uncooperative behavior
- Deceitful or secretive
- Makes endless excuses
- Decreased Motivation
- Lethargic movement
- Unable to speak intelligibly, slurred speech, or rapid-fire speech
- Inability to focus
- Hyperactivity
- Unusually elated
- Periods of sleeplessness or high energy, followed by long periods of "catch up" sleep
- Disappearances for long periods of time

School- or Work-Related Issues

- Truancy or loss of interest in schoolwork
- Loss of interest in extracurricular activities, hobbies, or sports
- Failure to fulfill responsibilities at school or work
- Complaints from teachers or co-workers
- Reports of intoxication at school or work

Health Issues Related to Teen Substance Abuse

- Nosebleeds
- Runny nose, not caused by allergies or a cold
- Frequent sickness
- Sores, spots around mouth
- Queasy, nauseous
- Seizures
- Vomiting
- Wetting lips or excessive thirst (known as "cotton mouth")
- Sudden or dramatic weight loss or gain
- Skin abrasions/bruises
- Accidents or injuries
- Depression
- Headaches
- Sweatiness

Home- or Car-Related

- Disappearance of prescription or over-the-counter pills
- Missing alcohol or cigarettes
- Disappearance of money or valuables
- Smell in the car or bottles, pipes, or bongs on floor or in glove box
- Appearance of unusual containers or wrappers, or seeds left on surfaces used to clean marijuana, like Frisbees,
- Appearance of unusual drug apparatuses, including pipes, rolling papers, small medicine bottles, eye drops, butane lighters, or makeshift smoking devices, like bongs made out of toilet paper rolls and aluminum foil
- Hidden stashes of alcohol

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