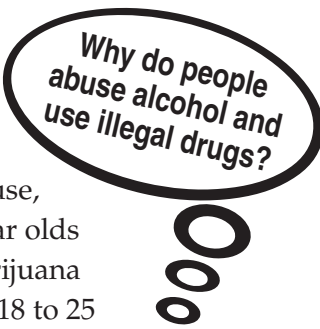


Talking about Alcohol and Drug Use

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Whenever we talk to family members or friends about alcohol and illegal drugs, we should ask ourselves: “Why do people abuse alcohol and use illegal drugs?” Even though the legal drinking age in the United States is 21, nationally about 30 percent of young people between the ages of 12 and 20 report that they have consumed an alcoholic drink during the last 30 days.

When asked about marijuana use, about 21 percent of 12 to 17 year olds report that they have used marijuana in their life. For young adults (18 to 25 years of age) this number is 54 percent (*National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings, 2002*).



Why do people abuse alcohol and use illegal drugs?

Why do people use alcohol and other drugs?

Throughout human history, people have looked for substances that would increase their energy, protect their health, make them feel good or increase their spiritual well being. There are a lot of reasons why people (adolescents as well as adults) are attracted to alcohol and illegal drugs. The reasons often stated are to relax, socialize, find inner peace, release tension and frustration, relieve boredom, help escape certain realities or personal troubles.

The use of legal and illegal drugs can have tremendous implications and create serious challenges. These problems can go beyond troubles with the law for illegal drug use, driving under the influence, and underage drinking. On an individual level, the more dangerous outcomes are dependence (physical/psychological symptoms of withdrawal when the drug is not taken) and addiction (constant seeking and thinking of drugs, even though the person is aware of the negative consequences). This may lead to many problems such as detoxification, incarceration, relationship problems and ultimately illness or even death.

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■ Alcohol

The most commonly used drug by adults and adolescents is alcohol. For many people, alcohol use may have caused both enjoyable moments as well as very sad ones. Alcohol has been shown to be a contributing factor in accidents. In addition, excessive alcohol consumption has been linked to chronic diseases such as heart attacks and strokes.

Research findings reveal that about 3 million people between 16 and 20 years of age have driven under the influence of alcohol, at least once during the last year (National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, collected 2001). About 13 million individuals have been identified as alcoholics, and many of them started drinking during adolescence.

How does alcohol affect the body and mind?

Alcohol is an extremely strong and powerful drug. In high doses it can damage and even destroy biological tissues, including muscle and brain cells. Alcohol is a depressant, even though in low doses it might feel like a mild stimulant. It slows down brain activities and can impair physical responses. Alcohol can lead to slower reaction times, uncoordinated movements, passing out, and death. Because of these effects, people who drink too much may fall asleep outside, which can be deadly in cold weather.

Alcohol use reduces inhibition and impairs judgment. People become more talkative and confident (this is the reason many people give for drinking). However, when alcohol consumption is continued, an individual's performance will become impaired. For instance, people will have difficulties with motor skills such as driving a car or using equipment. If drinking is continued, the person may become drowsy and fall asleep. Excessive drinking **in a short period of time** can cause someone to fall into a coma and even die because it depresses the autonomic nervous system and the body stops functioning. Consider the stories you may have heard about people who engaged in binge drinking

or funneling. Some stories about binge drinking, funneling or hazing describe very horrible outcomes, such as injury and death.

We need to consider that each of these effects described above will depend on the following:

- The way the body is able to metabolize alcohol.
- The time frame and amount of alcohol consumed.
- Body weight.
- Tolerance to alcohol (based on prior use and length and time a person has been drinking).
- If alcohol is mixed with soda pop (can speed up the rate of absorption and therefore the effects of alcohol are sometimes felt in a shorter period of time).
- If food is eaten while drinking.

Drinking during and after pregnancy

Alcohol and pregnancy: Drinking during pregnancy should be avoided. People might ask why, based on personal experience or stories. They might tell stories of relatives and friends who drank alcohol during pregnancy and their babies were just fine.

However, we have learned a lot during the last couple of decades about how alcohol can affect an unborn child. Alcohol passes freely through the placenta during pregnancy, meaning the child is exposed to the alcohol consumed by the mother. It stays in the system of the unborn child longer, probably because the child's organs (such as kidneys and liver) are not fully developed. We also know that there are critical periods for unborn children when essential physical development (including brain development) takes place. It appears that even a small amount of alcohol can damage the unborn child's development when it is consumed during these critical periods. Because we don't know the exact amount of alcohol that will harm the baby, it is best to completely abstain from drinking alcohol during pregnancy and even after the baby is born. Alcohol has been shown to enter breast milk so nursing mothers should avoid alcohol.

One of the unfortunate outcomes for the baby when the mother drinks alcohol during pregnancy is Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). Children born with FAS may have a low birth weight, as well as other medical problems such as mental retardation, attention deficit and learning disorders. Physical symptoms can include a flat

General Signs of Substance Abuse or Dependence (according to the DSM-IV)

A person is defined as abusing a substance if he or she is dependent on that substance and reports one or more of the following symptoms in the past year:

- Recurrent use resulting in a failure to fulfill major obligations at work, school, or home.
- Recurrent use in situations in which it is physically hazardous (e.g., driving a car)
- Recurrent substance-related legal problems (arrests).
- Continued use despite having persistent or recurrent social or interpersonal problems.

A person is defined as being dependent on a substance if he or she reports three or more of the following symptoms in the past year:

- Tolerance — discovering the substance is less effective when using the same amount (needing more to become intoxicated).
- Withdrawal (characteristic withdrawal associated with type of drug).
- Using more, or for longer periods than intended.
- Desire to stop or cut back use with unsuccessful results.
- Considerable time spent in obtaining or using the substance or recovering from its effects.
- Important social, work, or recreational activities given up or reduced because of use.
- Continued use despite knowledge of problems caused by usage.



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Tips to Talk to Your Teens about Alcohol and Drugs

- Make the position of the family on alcohol and illegal drug use clear. State what the consequences will be and reinforce them when necessary.
- Provide correct information about different drugs (teens often have incorrect information about the effects of drugs from the media or friends).
- If you don't know the answer to certain questions, say that you don't know. Then take the opportunity to find the correct answer (go to the local library, the drug prevention center, or any other resource you have in your community).
- Be aware that you, the parent, are a role model. How do you talk about drugs around your teens? Do you have a problem with drugs yourself? Remember, your teens learn from you.
- Talk about the difference between illegal drugs (marijuana, meth, alcohol if under 21, etc.), legal drugs (alcohol if over 21), and prescription drugs (drugs prescribed from a medical doctor).
- If you suspect that someone in your family has a problem with drugs/alcohol-find help!

For more information please contact your local Chemical Prevention Office at:

P.O. Box 517
Fort Yates, ND 58538
(701) 854-7254

This material was developed using information from:

www.samhsa.gov, www.DrugAbuseStatistics.samhsa.gov and <http://childtrendsdataband.org/>.

Goldstein, (A). 2001. *Addiction: From biology to drug policy*. New York: Oxford University Press.