

About Drugs and Your Child

“These

so-called

‘junkies’ are our

brothers, sisters,

sons and

daughters. They

made a tragic

mistake when

they took

the risk . . .

What is a drug?

Scientists define a drug as any substance, other than food, which is taken to change the way the body or the mind functions. Drugs can be legal or illegal, helpful or harmful.

Mood altering drugs – also called psychoactive – are drugs that can change or affect the way a person thinks, feels or acts. These drugs usually have physical effects as well, but the thing that sets them apart from other drugs is that they work on the mind and the senses. Prescribed drugs in this category can be used to relieve pain, calm nervousness, or aid sleep. Some, like nicotine (a stimulant) and alcohol (a sedative), can be purchased and used by almost anyone. Others, like cannabis and cocaine, are illegal street-drugs. Some drug users’ involvement with street drugs causes as much harm from their illegality as it does from their physical effects.

Where’s the harm?

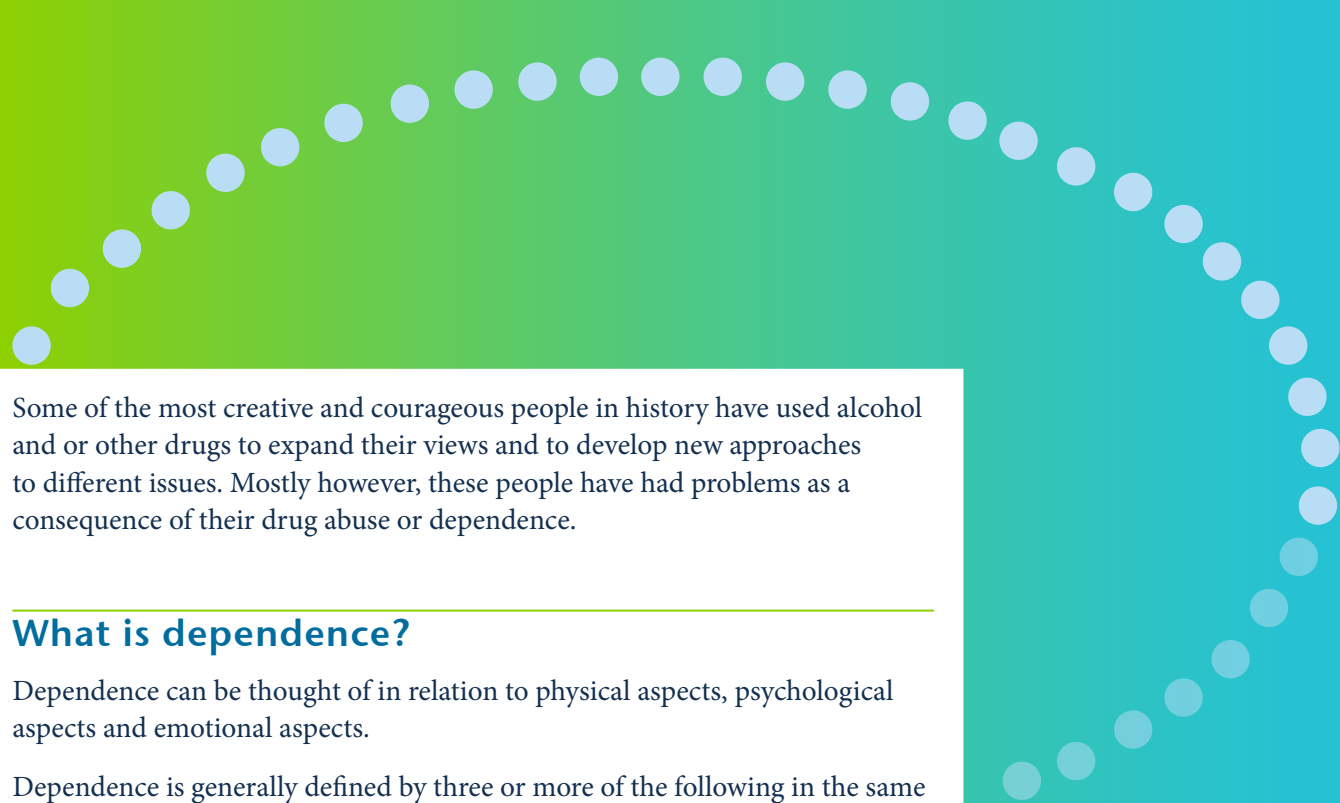
Some drug users seem to manage careers, families, and life in general, all the while maintaining heavy patterns of use. For many others, drug dependency causes the loss of jobs, family, and health. It drives some to steal, deal drugs, or sell themselves. It costs some their lives.

Illegal drugs are often mixed with other substances, so a user can never know what is in the drug or how strong it is. Drug effects may also be unexpected. They differ with the weight and height of a person, whether they’ve taken it before, where they are at the time (e.g., alone or with friends, at home or at a party) and dosage strength. Reflexes and the ability to make decisions are affected, which means it’s easier to have an accident (such as drowning or falling), or do something one later regrets (such as having unsafe sex).

Sometimes people with a mental illness use drugs to help them cope with their illness (self-medicate). However, drug use usually makes the condition worse.

Who is at risk?

No one knows why a small proportion of those who consume any drug, including alcohol, will become dependent, who is at risk, or why. One thing is certain, though. While dependence is not inevitable, it can strike in any family, in any neighbourhood.



Some of the most creative and courageous people in history have used alcohol and or other drugs to expand their views and to develop new approaches to different issues. Mostly however, these people have had problems as a consequence of their drug abuse or dependence.

What is dependence?

Dependence can be thought of in relation to physical aspects, psychological aspects and emotional aspects.

Dependence is generally defined by three or more of the following in the same year:

- ◆ Increased tolerance to the drug, meaning that the same amount of the drug no longer achieves the desired effect Withdrawal syndrome from either the drug, or from another substance taken to relieve or avoid the drug's withdrawal symptoms
- ◆ Taking the drug in larger amounts or over a longer period than was intended
- ◆ Being unsuccessful in cutting down or controlling drug use
- ◆ Spending a great deal of time obtaining the substance, using it, or recovering from its effects
- ◆ Giving up or reducing important social, occupational, or recreational activities because of substance abuse
- ◆ Continuing to use a substance likely to have caused or worsened a persistent or recurring physical or psychological problem

Watch for the signs

Since you're reading this, it's likely that you already suspect or know that your child is using drugs. But if you are looking for confirmation before you intervene, watch for some of the indicators (next page).

*... that led to
their addiction,
and they could
very well spend
the rest of their
lives paying
for it. It could
happen to
anybody. No
one is immune."*

*"If
your son or
daughter resists
intervention,
try to raise
issues that
affect you, your
family, your
home."*

Early indicators of drug use

- ♦ Be on the lookout for signs of depression, poor self esteem, and obsessive behaviours. If these statements sound familiar, pay attention.
 - ♦ "No one likes me."
 - ♦ "What's wrong with me?"
 - ♦ "Why am I so different? Why don't I fit in?"
- ♦ If your young person is a risk taker, be alert. Drugs have a certain glamour and appeal, and risk takers tend to experiment.

Physical and emotional signs of drug use

(These may vary according to the drug ingested)

♦ Rapid weight loss (sometimes indicates "meth," cocaine, or heroin use)	♦ Recurrent itchiness and compulsive scratching (associated with the use of many drugs)
♦ Little sores on hands, legs, or face	♦ Sniffing
♦ Glazed or runny eyes, pin point or enlarged pupils	♦ Blackened fingers
♦ Sore back or the jitters (withdrawal symptoms)	♦ Blackened teeth or excessive dental decay

Behavioural signs of drug use

♦ Unusual or changed sleeping patterns from the usual "sleeping in" characteristic of teenagers, including being up or out all night and sleeping all day, or an inability to sleep	♦ Severe mood swings, including reactions not appropriate to the situation: for example, the individual is endearing one minute but aggressive, angry, or uncooperative the next
♦ Frequent requests for money, and/or frequent bank withdrawals	♦ Falling/failing grades or dropping out of school
♦ Non-stop or rapid fire talking, especially in a usually quiet person	♦ Furtive telephone conversations, and secrecy about their comings and goings

Behavioural signs of drug use - continued

- | | |
|---|--|
| ♦ Lack of conversation in an individual who was previously talkative | ♦ New friends with unspoken last names and/or with cell phone numbers that are blocked |
| ♦ Loss of old friends | ♦ Lying |
| ♦ Changing habits: individuals who once were neat are now untidy, with increasingly poor hygiene | ♦ Lots of time spent in the bathroom and bedroom behind locked doors |
| ♦ Frequent change of jobs (could mean the individual is getting fired for not showing up to work) | |

Drug use clues around the house

- ♦ blackened spoons, knives, or foil: these are used to “cook” or heat drugs, or to make pipes
- ♦ dismantled ballpoint pens, glass tubes: these are used as smoking tubes
- ♦ rolled-up, bloody tissues: some drugs make your nose bleed
- ♦ dented pop cans or other containers with little holes in the dent: these are used as pipes
- ♦ corners torn off magazine pages and other squares of paper: these are used to make flaps to carry drugs
- ♦ collection of products for producing crystal meth (two or more of these items):
 - ♦ common cold pills containing ephedrine or pseudoephedrine
 - ♦ acetone
 - ♦ rubbing alcohol
 - ♦ gasoline additives
 - ♦ brake cleaner
 - ♦ engine starter
 - ♦ drain cleaner
 - ♦ coffee filters
 - ♦ MSM (methyl sulfonyl methane)
 - ♦ salt
 - ♦ lithium batteries
 - ♦ muriatic acid
 - ♦ propane tanks
 - ♦ iodine
 - ♦ lye (an ingredient in drain cleaners also used to make soap)

“My
son first started
acted strangely
when he was 11,
in Grade Six...”

...I
was
inexperienced
and unprepared.
I didn't know it
was drugs."

Some people begin using drugs with legal over-the-counter medications commonly found within most households. There is a general misunderstanding that if a medication is not a prescription and can be purchased by anyone, it is safe, even when consumed in large quantities. Over-the-counter medications can be just as dangerous as any prescription medication, and if taken incorrectly can have life-long, life threatening or fatal consequences.

Because of the availability of over-the-counter medication within most households and at pharmacies, experimentation can occur easily and in an unregulated fashion. It is important to keep all medications within a secure area and be mindful when medications are missing.

The other issue with over-the-counter medications is that they are used as additives in making illegal substances. Commonly abused over-the-counter medications are Benadryl, Benylin and other cough suppressants, Gravol, antihistamines, ephedrine and pseudoephedrine products, Tylenol and Aspirin.

A note of caution

Many of the behavioural signs of drug use listed here could have completely different explanations. This is the time to increase communication so that you can better understand your child's circumstances. So much depends on your ongoing relationship with this young person.