

TEEN DRUG & ALCOHOL ABUSE

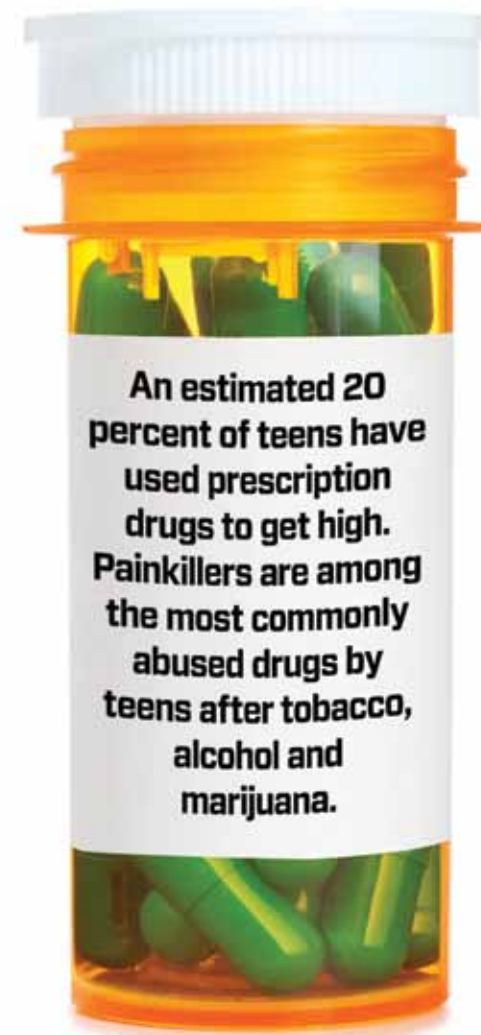
How Parents Can Recognize and Prevent It

By JENNI FRANKENBERG VEAL

Substance abuse can be a major threat to the health and well-being of teenagers. Alcohol and drugs change the way the brain functions, particularly the areas of the brain that control decision-making and emotions. Substance abuse can also affect memory and learning, which can harm a teen's performance in school. The most significant danger of teen substance abuse is that

it can progress from experimenting or occasional use to abuse and addiction.

Among youth age 12 to 17, an estimated 1.1 million meet the diagnostic criteria for dependence on drugs and about 1 million are treated for alcohol dependency. Common substances abused by teens include: alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, prescription drugs, cocaine and heroin, inhalants, opiates, "club drugs" (ecstasy, etc.), stimulants, hallucinogens and steroids.



Drug and Alcohol Abuse - Can Begin Early

- Substance abuse among teens can start early. It is more widespread than you may think, and it has potential consequences well into adult life. The average age of first marijuana use is 14, and alcohol use can start before age 12.
- Teen alcohol use kills about 6,000 people each year, more than all illegal drugs combined.
- According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, about 55 percent of teens have used an illicit drug by the time they leave high school and about 25 percent of all seniors are current users.
- An estimated 20 percent of teens have used prescription drugs to get high. Painkillers are among the most commonly abused drugs by teens after tobacco, alcohol and marijuana.
- An estimated 20 million adults in the United States abuse alcohol. More than half started drinking heavily when they were teenagers.

Warning Signs

If you think your teen may have a problem with substance abuse, look for these warning signs:

- **Physical Signs:** Watch for signs of fatigue, a decline in personal appearance, repeated health complaints, and/or red and glazed eyes.
- **Emotional Signs:** Personality changes, sudden mood changes, irritability, irresponsible behavior, low self-esteem, poor judgment, depression and a general lack of interest can all indicate a problem.
- **Family Issues:** A struggling teen may show changes in home behavior that are more severe than expected from teenagers, such as aggressiveness or withdrawal.
- **School Problems:** Changes that indicate a loss of interest or lack of involvement in school can indicate a problem, such as a drop in grades, many absences and discipline problems.
- **Social Problems:** Peer influence has the greatest effect on whether your teen is using substances.

If you have concerns about your teen, consult a physician to rule out physical causes of these symptoms. If drug or alcohol use is suspected, a child and adolescent psychiatrist or mental health professional can provide more information and a comprehensive evaluation.



Which Teens Are Most at Risk?

The teen years often involve trying new things and taking risks, which can increase the lure of drugs or use of alcohol. Teens may also experiment with drugs and alcohol in order to fit in with friends or to make them feel more grown up. Teens with family members who have problems with alcohol or drugs are more likely to have serious substance abuse problems. Teens who do not feel connected to or valued by their parents or who suffer from emotional or mental health problems, such as depression, are also at a greater risk for substance abuse problems.

Take an Active Role

The way you parent and take control of educating your teen about substance abuse is important. Clearly communicate your expectations regarding drug and alcohol use. Communicate with your teen about the negative physical, emotional and functional effects of drugs.

Positive Self-Image Goes a Long Way

Teens with positive self-images are less likely to develop substance abuse problems than teens with negative self-images. Therefore, it is worthwhile to invest your time in helping your teen develop a healthy self-image. Here are some tips:

- Help your child to be realistic in evaluating his or herself.
- Bond and relate to your teen.
- Help kids become involved in positive, constructive experiences.
- Recognize the negative influences in a teen's life, such as negative peer groups and negative media influences.

Tips for Parents

"The signs and symptoms are usually exaggerated behaviors commonly seen in adolescents - mood changes, sleeping too much or too little, isolating, bucking authority, errors in judgment, and erratic behaviors. I believe that's why it is hard for parents to see the alcohol and drug use until it has progressed to something more severe. If a parent is concerned, don't be afraid to ask questions, observe and explore.

A foundation of honest open communication between child and parent goes a long way in teaching boundaries when situations arise. Parents must not be confused about their roles. Often I see adult addicts that describe 'friendship relationships' with their parents growing up. Parents can't be a friend to their child, they have to be a parent that communicates reasonable expectations, teaches, steps back, and observes, supports and then repeats the process. Setting consistent age appropriate boundaries is critical."

- **Thomas Tullos, LPC, CSAT,**
Co-Clinical Director,
Focus Healthcare of Tennessee



Help your teen plan an exit strategy for dealing with uncomfortable situations.

Tips for Teens

The following tips can help provide an "out" for your teen when the opportunity to experiment with drugs and alcohol arises:

- If saying "no" makes your teen feel embarrassed or uncomfortable, tell him or her to simply blame it on you. Try these: "I would like to, but my mom is making me do ___ instead," or "I don't want to get in trouble with my mom and dad. They're really strict."
- Help your teen plan an exit strategy for dealing with uncomfortable situations, such as developing a signal with a friend to tell each other they are ready to leave.
- Help your teen think of activities they can do with friends that don't involve alcohol or drugs, such as going to sports events, hiking and bike riding, and going to the movies.

Keeping Your Teen Drug and Alcohol Free

Other efforts that can help you keep your teen away from drugs and alcohol include:

- Always know your teen's whereabouts.
- Know the parents of your teen's friends.
- Always make sure you have a phone number to reach your teen.
- Have your teen check in regularly when away from home.
- Have your teen sign a contract that outlines the consequences for certain actions. Always follow through with those consequences if the contract is broken.
- Encourage responsible behavior.
- Keep the lines of communication open.

All alcohol and drug use by teenagers should be regarded as dangerous, not only because of the risk of addiction, but because teen drinkers and drug users put themselves in harm's way. The best way to protect your teen from substance abuse is to know the signs, discuss the issue with your teen, and get appropriate treatment if your teen has a substance abuse problem.

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