

# Do You Think - or Know - That Your Child Is Using Drugs or Alcohol?

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Even if you believe your teen is just "experimenting" it's important to take action right away.

Casual drug use can quickly turn into drug abuse, dependence or addiction and can lead to accidents, legal trouble, and serious health issues.

If you are at all concerned about your child - or even just have a bad feeling- you can and should intervene by:

- Setting tighter limits with clear consequences.
- Getting outside help and support if necessary.
- Having productive conversations with your child -- remain calm, share your concerns and listen.
- Closely monitoring your child's behavior and activities.

## Look for Signs and Symptoms

Knowing what to look for is a huge help in determining whether your child is drinking or using drugs - If you're familiar with the signs of drug use, that knowledge can aid you in gathering evidence and starting the conversation. Here you'll find a comprehensive list of signs and symptoms of drug and alcohol use.

Keep in mind: Many of these signs of drug use or alcohol use - in isolation - may be just normal teen behavior. Mood swings or changes in behavior are a standard part of growing up as teens make the transition from childhood to adulthood. However, as you start to recognize more and more of these signs and symptoms in your teen, a picture of drug or alcohol use may begin to become clear.

## Clue In to Behavioral Issues

The signs of substance abuse aren't all physical. Be aware of these behavioral indicators that may be a sign that your teen has been drinking or is using drugs, especially if you've noticed an abrupt change in one of these behaviors.

- Change in relationships with family members or friends
  - If your teens treats you or other family with blatant disrespect, or has completely ditched certain friends, drugs could be to blame.
- 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- Sullen, withdrawn, depressed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
- Hostile, angry, uncooperative
- Deceitful or secretive
- Makes endless excuses
- Decreased Motivation

An overwhelmed teen may just "drop" a class or club, but a general lack of motivation for school, activities and friends could be a sign of substance abuse.

- Lethargic
- Unable to speak intelligibly, slurred speech, or rapid-fire speech.

Barring hearing loss or stroke, slurred speech is usually linked to the influence of some type of drug.

- Inability to focus
- Hyperactive
- Unusually elated

It's good to have a happy teen, but if your kid is bizarrely elated for no reason, it is possible he's high off amphetamines or another drug.

- Periods of sleeplessness or high energy, followed by long periods of "catch up" sleep

Cocaine, meth, prescription pain relievers, prescription stimulants, and amphetamines keep users up for days, and then make them crash.

### Look for Changes in Personal Appearance

Most drug and alcohol use may cause some change in physical appearance. Few of these in isolation are definitive proof of teenage alcohol use or drug use, but may fit into a larger pattern of symptoms, or act as a way to open up a conversation with your teen.

- Messy, careless appearance
- Poor hygiene
- Track marks on arms or legs (or long sleeves in warm weather to hide marks)

Track marks are a clear sign of intravenous drug use. They range from small red marks to open sores and bruising.

- Burns or soot on fingers or lips
- Red, flushed cheeks or face

### Have Personal Habits or Actions Changed?

Look for changes in your teenager's behavior or personal habits that might indicate drug or alcohol use. If you notice any of the below, look for some of the other signs, or use them as a way to begin a talk with your teenager.

- Smell of smoke on breath or clothes
- Chewing gum or mints to cover up breath

- Heavy use of over-the-counter preparations to reduce eye reddening (eye drops), nasal irritation, or bad breath (breath mints or gum)
- Frequently breaks curfew
- Cash flow problems
- Reckless driving, car accidents, or unexplained dents in the car

Notice if your teen is driving more recklessly when she returns than when they left.

- Avoiding eye contact
  - Clenching teeth
- Both Meth and Ecstasy cause involuntary teeth clenching.
- Locked bedroom doors
  - Going out every night
  - Secretive phone calls, texting, instant messages or emails
  - "Munchies" or sudden, voracious appetite
  - Sudden or increased use of air fresheners, scented candles, or incense

### Take Note of Home or Car Related Signs of Substance Abuse

If you've noticed items disappearing around the house, or found some unusual objects appearing, it's a good time to have a talk with your teenager about what you've noticed, and to start looking for other signs of teenage alcohol abuse or drug use.

Mood swings and changes in behavior are often a normal part of teenage development. But in some cases, these may be potential indicators of teenage alcohol abuse or possible drug abuse. If you suspect your teen may be using alcohol or drugs, here are some tell-tale signs you can watch for:

- Disappearance of prescription or over-the-counter pills
- Missing alcohol or cigarettes
- Disappearance of money or valuables
- Unusual 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, like Frisbees, used to clean marijuana
- Appearance of unusual containers or wrappers and drug apparatus, 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

### Keep an Eye Out for Health

Drug and alcohol use can cause a number of effects on health, minor to major. Look for these symptoms in your teenager. If you spot some, don't be afraid to suggest a visit to your teen's doctor. Often a doctor can offer a medical perspective or an outside viewpoint on what's happening to your teen.

- Frequent nosebleeds

Excessive nosebleeds could be a sign of snorted drugs, such as cocaine or meth.

- Runny nose, not caused by allergies or a cold
- Frequent sickness

- Sores, spots around mouth
- Queasy, nauseous
- Seizures

If your child has a seizure but does not have epilepsy, you should be aware that it could have been caused by huffing inhalants.

- Vomiting
- Wetting lips or excessive thirst (known as "cotton mouth")
 

Discounting average thirst, dry mouth and excessive thirst are signs that a person is smoking marijuana or taking Ecstasy.
- Sudden or dramatic weight loss or gain
 

Heroin, cocaine, meth, amphetamines and prescription stimulants are all associated with severe weight loss, due to suppression of appetite.
- Skin abrasions/bruises
- Accidents or injuries
 

If your teen can't or doesn't want to tell you how she got hurt, it may be that she had an accident while drunk, high or stoned.
- Depression
- Headaches
- Sweatiness

### Pay Attention to School or Work-Related Issues

Notice how your teenager is doing at school, any sudden change in how she or he is doing homework - or what you're hearing from teachers or school administrators.

- Truancy or loss of interest in schoolwork
- Drop in grades
- Loss of interest in extracurricular activities, hobbies or sports
- Failure to fulfill responsibilities at school or work
 

There may be many reasons for this, but substance abuse is almost always accompanied by a decrease in motivation. Remember, asking doesn't hurt anyone.
- Complaints from teachers or co-workers
- Reports of intoxication at school or work