

Signs of drug use

Your child may be using alcohol or drugs if you notice a dramatic change in the teen's appearance, friends, or physical health.

These are other possible signs:

- Evidence of drugs and/or drug paraphernalia.
- Behavioral problems and poor grades in school.
- Emotional distancing, isolation, depression, or fatigue.
- Overly influenced by peers.
- Hostility, irritability, or change in level of cooperation around the house.
- Lying or increased evasiveness about after-school or weekend whereabouts.
- Decrease in interest in personal appearance.
- Physical changes, such as bloodshot eyes, runny nose, frequent sore throats, and rapid weight loss.
- Changes in mood, eating, or sleeping patterns.
- Dizziness and memory problems.
- Unusual odor on breath (alcohol, inhalants, marijuana).
- Widely dilated pupils even in bright light.
- Pinpoint pupils even in dim light.

Variety of causes

Drug use develops over time, and different pathways lead to drug problems. These are some of the general factors that may place a teen at risk:

- Too little parental supervision and monitoring
- Lack of communication and interaction between parents and children
- Poorly defined and poorly communicated family or home rules and expectations about drug use
- Inconsistent or excessively severe discipline
- Family conflict
- Parental permissiveness toward adolescent alcohol and drug use, and/or parental alcoholism or drug use
- Peers and peer pressure, especially if the teen hangs around with at-risk friends

In addition, a teen with the following mental or emotional tendencies may be at increased risk:

- Diagnosis of ADHD
- Medical history of an anxiety disorder or disruptive disorder
- Medical history of depression or bipolar disorder; this may appear after substance abuse begins
- Poor academic achievement
- Abnormal socialization between the ages of 7 and 9; abnormal socialization means having parents or peers who behave in ways not acceptable to most people; for instance, having parents who abuse drugs
- High need for sensation seeking or engaging in physically risky or dangerous behaviors
- Impulsiveness
- Psychological distress
- Difficulty maintaining emotional stability
- Perception that drug use is harmless
- Low family income, with little access to opportunity for success

Early treatment is best

The earlier you seek help for a teen's alcohol or drug problem, the better. A qualified family therapist can evaluate and assess your child, then provide appropriate treatment. This may include outpatient therapy or therapy in a residential treatment facility.

How successful treatment will be depends on your teen's temperament and willingness to change, as well as how long and how often the drug was used. It may take several times at trying to quit before your child is able to do so for the long term. Each attempt to quit brings the child closer to success.

Where should you look for a counselor for your child? Talk with your child's health care provider, other parents whose children have been treated for drug abuse, a local hospital, school social worker, or county mental health society.

Therapy focuses on the teen's life choices, in addition to his or her relationships with family members. It's essential you be involved in the treatment. Positive parent relationships are a critical ingredient in combating a teen's drug problems.