By age 14, 35% of youth have engaged in some form of illicit (illegal) drug use. By the end of high school, more than 50% will have tried at least one illicit drug. Teens who begin using illicit drugs before the age of 15 are more likely to develop a lifelong dependence on illegal substances. Below are a few of the most common drugs used by youth.

- **Marijuana** is the most prevalent illicit drug used by teens because it is easily accessible. In fact, 90% of high school seniors stated that obtaining marijuana is virtually trouble-free, and nearly 40% of 10th and 12th graders reported smoking marijuana in 1999. Teens who use this drug are more likely to initiate the use of other drugs (e.g., cocaine and heroin).

- **Ecstasy** is also a prevalent drug that is highly accessible and used at teen parties. Over the past few years, ecstasy use by teens has increased: one in thirty 8th graders and one in twelve 12th graders reported using ecstasy in 2000.

- **Heroin** is primarily injected into the vein but can also be inhaled nasally and smoked. While 8th graders’ overall use of the drug is declining, 12th graders’ use by means of inhaling is increasing.

- **Cocaine** has been a serious drug problem in America for almost a century. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (2001), 5% of 12th graders reported using cocaine in 2000.

**Teens at Risk?**

Factors associated with increased risk for any type of illicit drug use include at least one or more of the following:

- **Poor parent-child relations.** Studies show that living in a stressful home environment with relatively little parental support and monitoring places adolescents at greater risk for drug use.

- **Family environments that model drug use.** Adolescents are more likely to use drugs if someone in their home uses drugs. For example, parents who use drugs may practice poor parenting which may increase the risk of drug abuse for adolescents. Also, parental or sibling drug use sets a model of acceptable inappropriate behavior for teens, makes it seem like a normal part of life, and may encourage its acceptance by youth.

- **Peer drug use.** During adolescence, peers become a major influence because of the increased time spent with them outside of the home. Some teens feel pressured to fit in and do what their friends are doing. Consequently, teens that have friends who use drugs are more likely to use drugs themselves.

- **High risk communities.** Living in communities where drug use is widespread not only makes drug accessibility easier, but also normalizes the act of using drugs.

- **Low self-esteem.** Adolescents who do not have positive views of themselves, or who lack support and encouragement from others are more likely to use drugs.

- **Poor school achievement.** Teens who have negative attitudes toward school and low expectations of academic success are at increased risk of drug use. Also, teens who use drugs typically exhibit declines in grades, and inconsistent attendance at school.

What Are the Consequences?

The effects of drug use vary by type of drug and frequency of use, however, some consequences may include the following:

- **Mental and physical health problems.** Teens who use drugs are at greater risk for developing a number of health problems including attention deficit disorder, anxiety disorders, phobias, and depression.

- **Increased likelihood of drug use later in life.** Early drug use has been linked to positive attitudes toward
drug use. Consequently, teens who begin drug use early are at risk for continued drug habits into and through adulthood.

- **Involvement in other illegal activities.** Drug use has been linked to higher tolerance of deviant behavior among adolescents. This results in increased criminal activity for drug users compared to non-drug using peers.

- **Increased likelihood of death.** Drug use increases the odds of death from accidental or intentional drug overdoses as well as engagement in other unsafe behaviors (e.g., driving under the influence).

### What Can Parents Do?

Communication is key in dealing with any type of risk taking behavior during the teen years. The hectic pace of work and school can sometimes estrange family members, especially parents and teens. But make the effort to keep in touch with your teen. Find out what’s going on in his or her life. The best way to find out if your teen is using drugs is to just ask. During adolescence, parents may feel that their influence over their teen’s life is waning, but in fact, you have more power than anyone to prevent your child from using drugs. Here are some things that you can do to encourage your child to “Just Say No.”

- Stay connected with your teen. Keeping up to date with your teen’s interests and friends is an important step in creating a warm, communicative, and open environment. If your teen feels that you are available and easy to talk to, then he or she will be more likely to share concerns that might lead to risk taking behavior.

- Begin an ongoing conversation with your teen (vs. giving a one time speech). Make it clear that drug use is not an acceptable behavior in your family and be sure to talk about the reasons why. Talk about the consequences of drug use. Help your teen visualize two futures, one that includes drug use and one that remains drug free. Where do these paths lead? Discuss your teen’s life goals and how drug use can hinder them from reaching them.

- Empower your teen. Teens tend to want to rebel against their parents’ standards or advice. Rather than dictate what your child should or should not do, remind him or her that they have the power of choice and that you trust that they can and will make good decisions.

- Teens sometimes abuse substances as a way of alleviating stress. Some experiences in life (e.g., not making the basketball team, breaking up with a girlfriend or boyfriend) are both stressful and painful. Drugs are often sought as a means of temporarily easing pain or stress. Talk to your teen about any stressful events that are going on in his or her life and ways they can effectively handle them.

- Know your teen’s friends. You can influence your teen’s choice of peers by talking with them about the qualities that make a good friend.

- Encourage your teen’s self-esteem by praising their efforts and achievements. Help them to master the things that they are good at. Show them you care through your involvement in their lives/activities.

- Take advantage of teachable moments. These include talking about scenes in movies or news headlines that deal with drug associated topics. Explain your position on these topics and ask your teen how they feel about what they are viewing.

- Encourage healthy activities that promote the use of your teen’s interests and talents. Most teens are curious and are eager to try something new and challenging. High school is the peak time for both beginning substance use and beginning lifetime habits that include using illegal substances. Your parental example, support, and monitoring has a great influence on your teen’s behavior. Talk early and often about the consequences of and alternatives to using illicit drugs.

### References and Resources


Partnership for a Drug Free America: www.drugfreeamerica.org

The National Crime Prevention Council: www.ncpc.org


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