

Substance misuse among pre-teens and teens

It's more than kids experimenting



Who misuses drugs, alcohol, or tobacco

Any young person is vulnerable, especially through life changes into puberty and adulthood. The child with an issue could be the:

- **Student athlete** who is given an opioid for pain after a surgery and becomes addicted.
- **Academic scholar** who takes her friend's ADHD medicine to boost her grades even more.
- **Preteen** who uses her mom's prescriptions to ease the pressure of fitting in. She has a family history of dependence and doesn't know it.
- **Frustrated teen** who parties with alcohol and pot to rebel against his overly protective parents.
- **Middle schooler** who huffs (sniffs) glue or paint as her YouTube or TikTok challenge.
- **Insecure teen** who starts vaping nicotine with an older teenage neighbor.

Why it happens

Young people of all ages use drugs, alcohol, and tobacco for different reasons. It might be to:

- Fit in
- Feel good
- Cope
- Perform better
- Try something new

They can find themselves susceptible to addiction, based on a lot of things — many they can't control:

- Family history of dependence
- Pain following surgery or injury
- Failing/poor academics
- Social difficulty
- Depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions
- Trauma, early life stress, or sexual/physical abuse
- Lack of supervision at home

Speak to your family doctor or other health professional right away if you're concerned someone you know could be misusing substances.

For more information, visit startyourrecovery.org.

What you can do

- **Be aware of substances you have at home.**
Lock up alcohol, prescriptions, and other substances. Keep them out of sight. Educate yourself about what common household items kids use to get high. Watch for items that run out quickly, go missing, or end up in your trash.
- **Pay close attention to behavior changes.**
If you notice significant changes like those listed below, share your concerns with family, friends, teachers, and your family doctor.
- **Talk with your whole family about the dangers of a substance use disorder.**
Be truthful and open with kids and teens; keep talking about it. Brainstorm situations showing how to say no to peer pressure. Make them aware of reasons why they might be more vulnerable to substance use disorder or addiction, such as family history.
- **Be active in your kids' lives. Set clear rules. Be a good role model.**
Attend school events. Stay involved. Show you care, but let your loved ones know your limits are firm. What they see you do affects their decisions. Show them different ways to handle stress, express emotions, and have fun without alcohol.



What to look for

- Different behavior for no real reason — withdrawn, hostile, depressed, always tired
- Different set of friends
- Missing classes or declining grades
- No interest in school activities
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Escalating problems in relationships with friends and family

To find a treatment program, go to [samhsa.gov](https://www.samhsa.gov).

Sources:
American Addiction Centers website: [americaaddictioncenters.org](https://www.americaaddictioncenters.org).
Centers for Disease Control and Protection website: [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov).
National Institute on Drug Abuse website: [drugabuse.gov](https://www.drugabuse.gov)

This information is meant to educate, not serve as medical advice. Ask your doctor for medical advice about your health.

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