

Is My Child Using Alcohol, Tobacco, or Other Drugs? For Parents, Caregivers, and Other Adults

Research shows that parents are central to preventing the use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs (ATOD) by teens. In fact, kids themselves say that losing their parents' trust and respect are the most important reasons to not use alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs. Keeping the lines of communication open is key to the parent-teen relationship. This includes talking with as well as listening to your teen. One of the best things parents can do is to engage teens in discussions about friends and activities.

As a parent your actions matter. When you suspect, or know, that your child has been drinking, smoking, or using other drugs, take action to stop it as soon as you can. It may be the most important step you ever take. (See next page for signs and symptoms to watch for.)

What You Can Do

The most important thing you can do is to not deny the existence of a substance use problem. If you don't think you can handle it yourself, ask for help from a professional. You are not alone. It also may help to talk to other parents who have experienced what you are going through. Many communities have parent support groups. You can also contact your child's school or another trusted agency or organization. Ask your child if there is someone they trust or feel comfortable talking to.

There are many prevention and treatment specialists who can guide and inform you. Inquire if they have training in working with alcohol, tobacco, and other drug problems in teens, or if they can refer you to someone who does.

- School counselors and student assistance professionals
- Employee assistance programs and professionals
- Family doctors and pediatricians
- Nurses
- Faith leaders
- Community health centers
- Adolescent prevention and treatment professionals

Where to Go for Help and Information

For a list of Substance Abuse Regional Coordinating Agencies in Michigan, call Prevention Network at 1-800-968-4968 or visit www.preventionnetwork.org/pam.

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI)
1-800-729-6686; TDD 1-800-487-4889; <http://store.samhsa.gov/home>

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator, www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), www.samhsa.gov

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), www.nida.nih.gov/parent-teacher.html

Signs and symptoms of alcohol, tobacco, or other drug use are discussed on the back of this information sheet.



Signs and Symptoms of Alcohol, Tobacco, or Other Drug Use

How can you tell if your child is using alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs? It is difficult because changes in mood, attitude, temper, sleeping habits, hobbies, or other interests are common in the teen years, and some symptoms might be caused by a medical condition and not substance use. If you have any doubts, consider the following. Ask yourself if your child is doing well in school, getting along with friends, and taking part in sports or other activities.

Signs and symptoms to look for:

- Changes in friends; dropping old friends and getting new ones
- Negative changes in schoolwork, missing school, declining grades, or discipline problems
- Increased secrecy about possessions or activities
- Use of incense, room deodorant, or perfume to hide smoke or chemical odors
- Subtle changes in conversations with friends (more secretive or using “coded” language)
- Restlessness, excessive talking, rapid speech
- Irresponsible behavior, poor judgment
- Forgetfulness, slurred speech, or difficulty expressing thoughts
- Lack of coordination, poor balance
- Change in clothing choices; new fascination with clothes that highlight drug use
- Unusual borrowing of money; unexplained sources of money
- Evidence of drug paraphernalia such as pipes, rolling papers, etc.
- Evidence of use of inhalant products (such as hairspray, nail polish, correction fluid, common household products; rags and paper bags are sometimes used as accessories)
- Bottles of eye drops, which may be used to mask bloodshot eyes or dilated pupils
- New use of mouthwash or breath mints to cover up the smell of alcohol
- Missing prescription drugs—especially narcotics and mood stabilizers

Also look for signs of depression, withdrawal, carelessness with grooming, or hostility. These changes or symptoms often signal that something harmful is going on—and often that involves alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs. You may want to take your child to the doctor and ask about screening your child for alcohol, tobacco, or other drug use. This may involve the health professional asking your child a simple question, or it may involve a drug screen of the urine or blood. Some of these signs may also indicate a problem with depression or other medical condition, gang involvement, or thoughts of suicide. Be on the watch for these signs so that you can spot trouble before it goes too far.

Adapted from *Suspect Your Teen Is Using Drugs? A Brief Guide to Action for Parents*, developed by PARENTS.THE ANTI-DRUG. For information visit www.theantidrug.com.

Additional source: *Family Matters: Substance Abuse and the American Family*. A CASA White Paper. March 2005. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. www.casacolumbia.org.