



How dangerous is drugtaking?

Drug use can never be 100 per cent safe. It always involves risks, but it is not always as dangerous as some people make out. How dangerous it is depends on the drug itself, the person taking the drug and how and where the drug is taken.

The risk will also depend on:

- **How much is taken.**
- **How strong the dose is,** for example two ecstasy tablets which look the same may have very different doses in them.
- **How often it is taken.**
- **What else might be mixed in with the drug,** especially the rubbish that is often mixed with illegal drugs.
- **How a drug is taken;** injecting is the most dangerous way to use drugs – the dose is taken all at once so there is a danger of overdose – and if injecting equipment is shared, there is the danger of passing on infections like hepatitis and HIV (the virus that leads to AIDS).

THE PERSON

If you drink when you feel miserable, you will often feel worse; if you are anxious and depressed before taking LSD, you are more likely to have a bad experience. Also the following factors may influence the experience:

- **Physical health problems.** Drug use could be more dangerous for those with heart, blood pressure, epilepsy, diabetes or liver problems.
- **Weight.** Drugs act differently depending how heavy you are: the effects may be more in a lighter person.

● Not being used to drugs.

Somebody new to drug use may be anxious, unsure of what to do or expect and be more likely to get into problems or have a bad experience.

THE DRUG

Different drugs carry different risks.

Drugs such as heroin, alcohol or tranquillisers can lead to **physical dependence or withdrawal symptoms.**

Drugs like amphetamine, ecstasy and cocaine are **uppers** – they speed the body up – and can be particularly dangerous for people who have heart or blood pressure problems. Drugs like heroin, alcohol and solvents are **downers** – they slow the body down – and can be very dangerous if mixed because the body can stop altogether. This is an overdose and can be fatal.

Others are **hallucinogens** (LSD, magic mushrooms) and can lead to people freaking out and doing dangerous things. Anybody with a mental illness should steer well clear of these drugs and cannabis as well.

THE ENVIRONMENT

- **Where people use** can be risky. Some take drugs in dodgy places, like canal banks, near railway lines, in derelict buildings. Accidents are much more likely in these places, especially if people are out of their heads.

● What people are doing while they are on drugs can be risky.

Driving a car or bike or operating machinery while on drugs can greatly increase the chances of accidents. Having sex while on drugs can make remembering safer sex – like using condoms – much more difficult.

SO WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN?

It means that it is impossible to make simple statements like 'If you take this drug then this will happen.'

We are all individuals – what might be safe for one person could be dangerous for the next – or even dangerous for the same person in a different situation.



For your file

Write an article for a teenage magazine based on the information on this page explaining what makes drugtaking a risky business.

In groups

Discuss what you learn from this page about the different factors which affect how dangerous drugtaking is.

Should taking drugs be legalised?

Some people argue that all drugs should be made legal and given the same legal status as alcohol and tobacco. Others argue for decriminalisation, which would mean that possession would not be a criminal offence, but might be subject to penalties like those for speeding or parking illegally.

Surveys suggest that most people would be in favour of seeing the personal use of cannabis decriminalised. But the majority of the public is firmly against altering the restrictions on heroin and cocaine.

Should cannabis be legalised?

Yes...

- It would immediately take the supply of the drug of the hands of violent criminal syndicates.
- Compared to alcohol and tobacco, which are freely available, cannabis is not very harmful anyway.
- Any increased use of the drug would be greatly outweighed by the benefits gained.

No...

- It would be a first step to more widespread, and potentially disastrous, liberalisation of other drugs.
- It would lead to a great increase in use, which might put people on a 'slippery slope' to harder drugs.
- Some forms of cannabis are very harmful and have been implicated as a cause of mental health problems.

The benefits of legalisation

Many people may think that taking drugs is inherently wrong and so should be illegal. But there is a question of effectiveness – does making it illegal stop people doing it? The answer is clearly no.

Drugs could be regulated in the same manner that alcohol and tobacco are regulated and, more importantly heavily taxed.

A sensible policy of regulation and control would reduce burglary, cut gun crime, bring women off the streets, clear out our overflowing prisons, and raise billions in tax revenue. Drug users could buy from places where they would be sure the drugs had not been cut with dangerous, cost saving chemicals. There would be clear information about the dangers involved and on how to seek treatment.

In groups

Discuss the arguments for and against the legalisation of cannabis.

'Drugtaking is too dangerous to be legalised. People need to be protected from harming themselves by taking drugs.' Say why you agree or disagree with this view.

Do you think it should be up to individuals or the government to decide which substances they consume?

Drug problems

'My Life's a Mess'

Name: Sarah **Age:** 16 **Lives:** Suffolk

I used to think I'd never take drugs. I was happy enough – what did I need drugs for? If only things had stayed that way...



The first time I took speed I just wanted to try it once – to see what it was like. We were going to this party, and my friends said that we'd have a better night if we were off our heads. I can't remember much about the party now. I felt so tired afterwards – really done in.

Drug buddies

I started going out with these friends quite a bit – they knew where all the good parties were. We'd meet up on a Saturday night and take some whizz to see us through. We were having a brilliant time. My other friends at school seemed really immature and boring.

Out of control

After school, we'd meet up and smoke some spliffs. I could never be bothered to do any homework when I got home – I always felt so tired. When I failed the end of year exams I had this massive row with my Dad. I hated being at school and I hated being at home. I started stealing money from my mum's purse to pay for the drugs and the nights out. I knew I was letting her down – but it had got so I only felt good when I was off my head on something.

Disaster

There was this big night out planned. I wanted to try some E –

but I was broke. Me and a mate went into town and nicked some stuff from one of the department stores. I was really scared. We thought we'd got away with it, but then the store detective came up to me – it was the worst moment of my whole life.

Shunned

The police told my parents – and now my Dad won't speak to me. He says he never thought his daughter would turn out to be a thief. My friends at school have found out about the shoplifting and some of them are keeping away from me. I don't know how all this happened. I never thought I'd be in trouble with the police. It's going to take a long time before people trust me again – I just wish everything was back to normal.

How to help a friend who has a problem with drugs

We all need friends. Sometimes we need the help they can give us. Sometimes it's our turn to help them out. If someone you know has a problem with drugs ...

- **Stick by them. Don't turn your back on them.**
- **Listen to them and how they say they feel.**
- **Don't start slagging them off to their face or other people.**
- **Suggest what they might do but don't keep on about it. They will have to make their own decisions.**
- **If they want, offer to go with them if they are going to seek help from a drug agency, doctor, counsellor or whoever.**
- **Encourage them to be positive about themselves.**
- **Encourage them to feel they can do something positive about their problems.**

In groups

Discuss Sarah's story. Talk about how getting into drugs has affected her life. If you were Sarah's friend, what would you say to her to try to help?

For your file

'Dear Melanie, My friend's got involved in the drug scene. She's got real problems. How can I help her?' Shania

Write the reply you would send to Shania if you were Melanie.

What to do in an emergency

Drug use can be dangerous and it's important that you know what to do in an emergency. The lives of friends and people around you could depend on you knowing basic first aid.

If people are tense and panicky

This tends to occur with hallucinogenic drugs like LSD and magic mushrooms, but it also happens with drugs like amphetamines and ecstasy as well as high doses of cannabis. If someone is really tense and panicky on drugs take the following steps:

- ✓ Calm them down and reassure them.
- ✓ Talk quietly and explain that the panicky feeling will gradually go.
- ✓ Keep them away from loud noises and bright lights.
- ✓ Help them if they overbreathe (hyperventilate). When someone breathes very quickly and gasps for breath, they often get dizzy and feel sick.

If people overheat or dehydrate

This tends to happen with drugs like amphetamines and ecstasy when people really exert themselves. These drugs raise body temperature. Overheating and dehydration can result. This can be very dangerous and has been the main reason for ecstasy-related deaths.

The warning signs include: ● cramps in the legs, arms and back ● failure to sweat ● headaches and dizziness, vomiting ● suddenly feeling very tired ● feeling like a pee but not doing much when you go ● fainting.

It can be prevented by:

- ✓ Avoiding amphetamines or ecstasy in the first place.
- ✓ Not dancing for long periods at a time; taking regular rests and relaxing in a cool area.
- ✓ Drinking water, fruit juice or a sports drink at about the rate of one pint an hour (sipping the drink regularly) and avoiding alcohol.
- ✓ Drinking or eating something that keeps the salt levels in the body up. Salty snacks, fruit juice, fizzy drinks and sports drinks will all help to keep the body provided with the minerals it needs.
- ✓ Wearing cool clothes and not wearing hats (hats keep heat in).

If someone is overheating:

- ✓ Move the person to a cool area – outside if possible.
- ✓ Splash them with cold water to cool them down.
- ✓ Call an ambulance. Explain to the ambulance crew what has happened and what you have done.

If people are drowsy but conscious

This usually happens with downer drugs like alcohol, tranquillisers and heroin, but can happen with solvents (glue and gas). If someone is really drowsy take the following steps:

- ✓ Put the person in the recovery position and keep talking to them.
- ✓ Try to stop them becoming unconscious and don't put them to bed as they might lose consciousness in their sleep.
- ✓ If they want a drink only give them sips of lukewarm water.
- ✓ Call for medical assistance.

If people faint or lose consciousness

Give them emergency first aid, by putting them in the recovery position, checking their breathing and loosening any tight clothing that might restrict it, and call for an ambulance.

For your file

Draw a cartoon strip of an incident in which a teenager becomes ill after taking drugs. Show how the person is given first aid by their friends