



# Understanding substance use

## What is substance use?

When people talk about substance use, they are usually referring to the consumption of substances like alcohol, drugs or other chemicals that can change the way we think and feel. Because they can alter thoughts and perceptions, these substances are described as “psychoactive.”

A wide array of substances – both legal and illegal – are potentially psychoactive. Legally available drugs include over-the-counter medications like cough and cold remedies, as well as prescribed medications like pain killers (opioids such as codeine or Percocet, for example). Illegal substances, or “street drugs” can include, for example, cocaine, methamphetamine or heroin. Other chemical substances never intended for human consumption, like fumes from glue, solvents, or gasoline are also used by some to get “high.”



## Substance use risks

Substance use has risks at all ages, but young people are at particular risk of:

- harm to physical and mental health, in the short and long term
- harm to the brain – the teenage brain is still developing, and substances may have negative impacts
- accidents, like car collisions, because of increased risk-taking and impaired judgment, attention and reflexes
- alcohol or drug poisoning, particularly since young people don't yet know their physical limits (binge drinking is common among young teenagers)
- difficulty with schoolwork and attendance
- isolation
- strain on important relationships with family and friends
- Long-term substance use issues (addiction)

## Signs of harmful substance use

Particular signs depend upon the substance being used, but in general, signs that someone's substance use might be negatively affecting them include:

- missing school, practices/games, work, or other important obligations
- caring less about school, hockey, or friendships and family
- changes to sleeping and eating patterns
- reduced concentration or memory
- increased secrecy about activities or whereabouts
- mood changes, irritability, personality change
- taking up with a new group of friends who are less connected to home and school

These may be warning signs of harmful substance use, but they can also signal other problems, like mental health issues. Either way, it's important to take these sorts of signs seriously. Don't ignore them.

## How you can help

As a friend, teammate, parent, or other caring adult, you can:

- Encourage them to confide in a trusted individual – perhaps a parent, relative, a school counsellor, or family doctor.
- If they are using substances, stay calm instead of showing panic and anger. Offer patience, compassion, and support.
- Educate yourself on harm reduction and ways to engage in a non-judgmental conversation about substance use.
- Keep communication open – talk to them and remember to listen. Try to understand their perspective.
- If the situation appears serious, get them the help they need. Early intervention can help. As a start, you can suggest they contact a family doctor or another trusted health professional.

## Finding help

If you're not sure where to go for help, you can always contact your CMHA Mental Health Coach connected with your team. Below you will also find some other suggested resources that may be helpful.

### » Kids Help Phone

They provide free professional counselling by phone or online, and can connect young people to information and local help. Kids Help Phone is available 24-7 for individuals between the ages of five and 20. Online chat is also available at certain times.

[www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)

Call: 1-800-668-6868

Text: 686868

### » Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA)

The CCSA has a list of provincial and territorial helplines that can help support individuals who need substance use support. You can find that list [here](#). You can also learn more about substance use and addictions at [www.ccsa.ca](http://www.ccsa.ca).

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These supports will stay confidential unless there's an immediate risk of harm. If seeking support by yourself is daunting, asking a trusted friend to be there when you're calling a helpline or scheduling an appointment can help. It can also be hard if you're struggling with stigma, have a fear of being stigmatized, or you aren't used to seeking mental health and addictions support. Educating yourself on mental health and addictions, showing yourself compassion, talking to people who are open about their own mental health and advocating for yourself are some steps to reduce stigma.