

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) Effects of Drugs



<https://www.drugabuse.gov/>

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Effects of Drugs

Drug use can hurt the **people who take drugs and the people around them**. This includes families, kids, and unborn babies.

Drug use can also hurt the **body and the brain**, sometimes forever.

Drug use can also lead to an addiction. An addiction is a long-lasting brain disorder. People with an addiction can't stop taking drugs on their own. They continue to use drugs even when they know that bad things can happen. Learn more about:

- [How Drug Use and Mental Health Problems Often Happen Together](#)
- [The Link Between Drug Use and HIV](#)

Visit the Easy-to-Read Drug Facts webpages listed under [Drugs That People Abuse](#) to learn more about the effects of specific drugs.

NEXT: [Drug Use and Other People](#)

Drug Use and Other People



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Drugs hurt the person taking them. They also hurt everyone around that person:

- husbands, wives, boyfriends, girlfriends
- teens, children, and babies
- other family members and friends
- people you work with

When you or a loved one uses drugs, life can feel out of control.

NEXT: [Drug Use and Families](#)

Drug Use and Families

When a person uses drugs, it might cause problems at home. Someone who uses drugs can lose control. Here are some examples of problems that drug use might cause:

- problems at work or school
- money problems
- domestic violence—the person can be more likely to hurt their partner
- child abuse—the person can be more likely to hurt children in the home
- arrests and prison time
- serious health problems and death

Some people who are [addicted](#) to drugs don't believe they are sick. They don't see that they are hurting their family. Other people who are addicted to drugs are aware of the problem. But they might be too scared to get help.

All of these problems can become the family's problems too.

NEXT: [Drug Use Hurts Kids](#)

Drug Use Hurts Kids

When parents or other family members use drugs, the children can get hurt.

Neglect

- People with drug problems can forget to take care of the kids.
- There might not be anyone making meals or helping the kids get washed, dressed, or dropped off to school.
- There might not be anyone to buy clothes or do the laundry.
- There might not be anyone to take the kids to the doctor or help with homework.

Unsafe living conditions

- Drug use can make parents unable to work and earn money.
- They might use up the family's money.
- The kids might go without heat, food, electricity, or even a place to live.

Physical danger

- When family members with drug problems are at home, it may not be safe for the kids.
- Family members with drug problems might not be alert enough to protect kids from accidents or from other adults who would harm them.
- There might be a lot of fighting.
- They might abuse or neglect the children.
- If someone at home is dealing drugs or doing other crimes, it's also dangerous for the kids.

Children might have to leave

- If parents are using drugs, the Department of Children and Family Services might take children out of the home to keep them safe and cared for. They might have to live with a family member in another home. Or they might have to live with foster parents.

Future problems

- When kids grow up with these problems around them, they are more

likely to have drug problems of their own.

Visit the Easy-to-Read Drug Facts webpage [Help Children and Teens Stay Drug-Free](#) to learn how to prevent kids from using drugs.

NEXT: [Drug Use Hurts Unborn Babies](#)

Drug Use Hurts Unborn Babies



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Mothers drinking alcohol or using drugs when pregnant is the most common cause of health problems in newborn babies.

When a woman is pregnant, a baby is growing inside her. If a woman uses drugs or alcohol* when she is pregnant, the drugs can pass to her baby.

Some drugs can cause the baby to go through withdrawal right after they are born. This means that the drug is in the baby's body, and can make the baby sick. It takes time for the drug to get out of the baby's body. This sickness is called "neonatal abstinence syndrome" or NAS. You might hear doctors use this term or see it in articles. Some of the drugs that can cause a baby to be born with NAS are:

- alcohol
- pain medicine (prescription opioids)
- heroin (illegal opioids)
- certain drugs for anxiety or sleep, like Xanax® or Valium®

Babies born to mothers who used drugs while pregnant also might:

- be born small
- have problems eating and sleeping
- have problems seeing, hearing, and moving
- be slow to develop

While growing up, the child might:

- have memory problems

- have trouble paying attention and learning in school
- need special teachers and schools
- have trouble getting along with others
- use or misuse drugs or develop an addiction

Children whose mothers used drugs while they were pregnant sometimes need special medical care all their lives. Some might not be able to live on their own when they grow up.

Programs can help pregnant women stop using drugs. This can help the baby a lot. If a pregnant woman wants to stop using drugs, it is very important that she gets help from a doctor. If a pregnant woman tries to stop using drugs on her own, it could hurt the baby.

It can be hard for any person with a drug problem to quit. But women in particular might be afraid to get help during or after pregnancy.

They might be scared of:

- getting in trouble
- people taking away the baby or their other kids
- people judging them
- not having anyone to watch their other kids

There is good treatment available for moms and babies. Pregnant women receiving medical treatment should talk with their doctor about a treatment plan.

*When we say drugs, that includes drugs OR alcohol.

NEXT: [Drug Use and Your Health](#)

Drug Use and Your Health

Drug use can hurt all parts of your body and cause health problems that don't go away.

Drug use, including smoking, can cause diseases that can kill you, like:

- heart disease
- stroke ("brain attack")
- cancer
- HIV/AIDS
- hepatitis (a liver disease)
- lung disease

A person misusing drugs is more likely to have accidents while driving, at work, at home, at parties—anywhere.

Drug misuse can make people angry and violent. People misusing drugs can hurt themselves and other people.

Drug misuse can make people with depression feel worse. It might feel so bad that they want to end their own lives.

Drug overdoses can kill people.

NEXT: [Other Effects on the Body](#)

Other Effects on the Body



Photo by ©istock.com/[Pixel_away](#)

Drugs that slow you down, like heroin and pain medicines, can make you stop breathing.

Heart problems

- Many drugs that are misused (like cocaine) can cause problems like heart attacks and high blood pressure.

Lung and breathing problems

- Some drugs can hurt your lungs.
- Smoking cigarettes can cause diseases such as cancer and emphysema, a painful lung disease.
- Smoking cigarettes and marijuana can cause lung infections and coughing.
- Heroin and pain medicines can make you stop breathing.
- Inhalants can hurt your lungs and airways AND stop your breathing.

Stomach problems

- Many drugs like cocaine, heroin, and pain medicines can make your stomach hurt and make you throw up.

Kidney problems

- Drugs like cocaine and heroin can hurt your kidneys.
- If your kidneys stop working, you can die.

Liver problems

- Alcohol and inhalant misuse can cause liver disease.

HIV/AIDS and hepatitis

- Injecting (shooting up) drugs with a needle can hurt your veins.
- Using dirty needles can give you HIV/AIDS and hepatitis. Hepatitis is a serious liver disease.

Most of these problems can cause you to be very sick or die.

NEXT: [Drug Use Hurts Brains](#)

Drug Use Hurts Brains

All drugs affect the brain. That's why they can make you feel high, low, fast, or slow. They also might make you see things that aren't there.

Some drugs can hurt your brain and affect how you act and how your body feels. These problems might last just a little while, or they may last for the rest of your life.

Some drugs can make your mood change quickly. You might get sad, angry, or scared for no reason. You might overreact to little problems. You might get violent or think that someone wants to hurt you.

Some drugs can make it hard to pay attention, remember things, or think clearly. That's why people often make bad decisions when they're on drugs.

Drug use can also hurt your ability to enjoy things. When you're addicted, things that used to make you feel good no longer make you happy. You might not enjoy seeing your friends or watching your favorite movie because all you can think about is getting more drugs. Usually, you can start enjoying things again once you stop using drugs, but it may take time.

NEXT: [Drug Use and Mental Health Problems Often Happen Together](#)

Drug Use and Mental Health Problems Often Happen Together

Many people who have drug problems also have mental health problems. Examples of mental health problems are:

Depression

- Depression makes you feel very sad and tired.

Anxiety

- Anxiety makes you feel nervous, worried, and afraid.

Bipolar disorder

- Bipolar disorder makes your mood change back and forth. You might be full of energy, excited, or angry. Then you might feel sad, tired, and hopeless.

ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder)

- ADHD makes you have trouble paying attention. It might be hard to sit still and focus.

Antisocial personality disorder

- Antisocial personality disorder makes it hard to have good relationships and care about other people's feelings.

Why are people with mental health problems more likely to also have drug problems?

- Drug use and mental health problems affect the same parts of the brain. This is part of the reason some people have both problems.
- Also, if someone feels really bad, they might try to make it better by using drugs. But that doesn't usually work for very long. Instead, they may become addicted to drugs and then feel even worse than before.

A drug problem can make a mental health problem worse. And a mental health problem can make a drug problem worse. Someone with both of these problems needs treatment for both at the same time to get better. People who think they have both problems should tell their doctor.

NEXT: [The Link Between Drug Use and HIV](#)

The Link Between Drug Use and HIV

HIV is the virus that causes the disease AIDS.

AIDS is a disease that makes your body unable to fight off certain illnesses. We have medicines that can treat HIV and AIDS, but there is no cure yet.

Drug use can put you in danger of getting HIV in two ways:

- **Unsafe sex**

When people are misusing drugs, they might not think clearly. They might do risky things. They might have sex without using a condom to protect against HIV, other infections, and pregnancy.

- **Sharing needles**

When people inject (shoot up) drugs like heroin, cocaine, or meth, they can get HIV by sharing a needle with someone who has the virus.

Doctors have learned that helping people to get off drugs also helps them avoid getting HIV.

Visit the HIV.gov webpage to learn more about HIV and AIDS.