



JSA Mental Health
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— FEATURED ARTICLE —

Introduction to Drug Use in Youth

Emphasizing the power of education to empower individuals and providing compassion, empathy and kindness”



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JSA CLINICAL TEAM



8-MINUTE READ

Drug use among teens and adolescents is a growing concern, with substances like marijuana, opioids, fentanyl, and meth posing serious risks to physical health, mental well-being, and future opportunities. As parents, recognizing early signs can lead to timely intervention and support.

Why This Matters for Youth:

Adolescents’ brains are still developing, making them more vulnerable to addiction and long-term damage. Peer pressure, stress, mental health issues, and easy access contribute to experimentation. Early detection can prevent escalation to dependency or overdose.

General Tips for Parents and Guardians:

- Observe changes in behavior, appearance, and routines.
- Foster open communication without judgment.
- Know resources: National Helpline (1-800-662-HELP), school counselors, or apps like “Talk. They Hear You.”

Over 20% of high school students have used marijuana, and opioid misuse affects thousands annually.

Common Signs of Any Drug Use in Teens

Behavioral Changes:

- Sudden secrecy or withdrawal from family and friends
- Drop in school performance, skipping classes, or loss of interest in hobbies
- Increased irritability, mood swings, or unexplained aggression Stealing money or valuables to fund habits
- Associating with new, questionable peer groups

Physical Signs:

- Changes in sleep patterns (insomnia or excessive sleeping)
- Unexplained weight loss or gain
- Poor hygiene, bloodshot eyes, or unusual smells on clothes/breath
- Frequent illnesses or unexplained injuries

Emotional and Mental Indicators:

- Heightened anxiety, depression, or paranoia

- Lack of motivation or “amotivational syndrome”
- Risky behaviors like driving under the influence

Paraphernalia to Watch For:

- Pipes or cigars
- Rolling papers
- Bongs
- Syringes
- Pill bottles
- Small plastic bags
- Burnt spoons
- Foil
- Straws with residue

Document patterns and seek professional help if multiple signs appear. Remember, these could also stem from non-drug issues like mental health.

Caution: Approach with empathy.

Marijuana Use in Youth

Marijuana (cannabis, weed, pot) is one of the most commonly used substances among teens, often perceived as “harmless” but linked to cognitive impairments in developing brains.

Short-Term Signs and Symptoms:

- Red, bloodshot eyes or frequent use of eye drops
- Increased appetite (“munchies”) or sudden cravings for junk food
- Slowed reaction time, impaired coordination, or giggling/laughter fits
- Strong, skunky odor on breath, clothes, or in rooms

Long-Term Effects in Adolescents:

- Memory problems, difficulty concentrating, or lower academic performance
- Chronic cough or respiratory issues from smoking
- Paranoia, anxiety, or hallucinations in high doses
- Withdrawal symptoms: Irritability, insomnia, or decreased appetite when stopping

Youth-Specific Risks:

- Higher likelihood of dependency if started young
- Impact on brain development, potentially lowering IQ
- Gateway to other substances or mental health disorders like depression

Stay Alert: Edibles or vapes are common ways to hide marijuana use. If you suspect marijuana use, talk calmly and consider testing or counseling.

Opioid Use in Adolescents

Opioids include prescription painkillers (like oxycodone) and heroin. Misuse often starts with leftover meds from injuries. In teens, it can lead to rapid addiction.

Signs and Symptoms of Use:

- Extreme drowsiness, nodding off, or “pinpoint” (constricted) pupils
- Nausea, vomiting, constipation, or itchy skin

- Slurred speech, confusion, or slowed breathing
- Track marks on arms from injection, or wearing long sleeves to hide them

Withdrawal Indicators (Often a Key Clue):

- Flu-like symptoms: Muscle aches, sweating, runny nose
- Anxiety, restlessness, or insomnia
- Dilated pupils and yawning excessively

Risks for Youth:

- High overdose potential due to respiratory depression
- Long-term: Tolerance buildup, leading to higher doses and addiction
- Co-occurring issues like hepatitis from shared needles
- Behavioral: Doctor shopping or faking pain for prescriptions

Safety Precaution: Safely store or dispose of unused pills via take-back programs. Seek immediate medical help for suspected overdose.

Fentanyl Use in Youth

Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid 50-100 times stronger than morphine, is often laced in other drugs, making it deadly for unsuspecting teens. **It's a top cause of overdose deaths.**

Signs and Symptoms (Similar to Opioids but More Intense):

- Rapid onset of euphoria followed by severe drowsiness or unconsciousness
- Blue lips/nails, cold/clammy skin, or gurgling sounds (overdose signs)
- Tiny pupils, slowed or stopped breathing
- Confusion, dizziness, or seizures in high exposure

Detection Challenges in Adolescents:

- **Often mixed in counterfeit pills, vapes, or marijuana** - teens may not know they're using it
- No distinct smell, making it hard to spot
- Withdrawal: Intense cravings, diarrhea, or severe pain

Critical Risks:

- **Overdose can occur with tiny amounts; death within minutes**
- Youth experimentation (e.g., via parties) heightens danger
- Long-term: Brain damage from oxygen deprivation during OD

Warning: "Rainbow Fentanyl" can be disguised as candy.

Call 911 immediately for overdose.

Methamphetamine (Meth) Use in Teens

Meth (crystal meth, ice) is a powerful stimulant that boosts energy but devastates health. Teens may use it for weight loss or studying, leading to addiction.

Signs and Symptoms:

- Hyperactivity, rapid speech, or excessive energy without sleep
- Decreased appetite, leading to rapid weight loss
- Dilated pupils, sweating, or high body temperature
- "Meth mouth": Severe tooth decay and gum disease

Behavioral and Mental Effects:

- Paranoia, hallucinations, or aggressive outbursts (“tweaking”) Repetitive behaviors like picking at skin, causing sores
- Crash phase: Extreme fatigue and depression after highs

Youth-Specific Concerns:

- Interferes with growth and brain development
- Increased risk of risky sexual behavior or violence
- Withdrawal: Profound depression, anxiety, or suicidal thoughts

Warning: Monitor online purchases or sudden interest in chemistry. Treatment involves therapy; detox can be dangerous without medical supervision.

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This article is intended for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Please consult a licensed mental health professional for diagnosis and treatment.