



Parental Drug and Alcohol Problems

What are drug and alcohol problems?

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Q. What do we mean by drug or alcohol problems?



Drug or alcohol problems (sometimes also called substance abuse or misuse) is a pattern of harmful behaviour involving the misuse or overuse of substances for mood-altering purposes. This means that the drug or alcohol changes how a person behaves or feels.

In order to understand drug and alcohol use, it is important to be clear about what we mean by the terms 'drugs' and 'alcohol' and what are the differences and similarities between them.

- Drugs are chemicals which, when taken into our bodies, affect how our body works or how we think, feel and behave.
- Some drugs are legal, such as caffeine, tobacco/nicotine and alcohol.

- Legal drugs also include medicines that are available over the counter in a chemist or prescribed by a doctor. A person can misuse these drugs by taking them in a way which they are not supposed to be used or in amounts not prescribed by their doctor.
- Other drugs like cannabis, cocaine, ecstasy and heroin are illegal. These drugs have loads of nicknames such as hash, weed, smack, coke, Es, pills, etc.
- Drugs such as those found in 'head shops' or those available on the internet are often referred to as head shop drugs. These products are now easier to access and may include incense blends, smoking mixes or party pills. They are unsafe and can have very serious consequences for the user.
- People also sometimes abuse inhalers and solvents.
- Alcohol is also a drug. It changes the way we feel and think. In Ireland, it is legal for adults over 18 years to buy and drink alcohol. It is against the law for anyone under 18 years to be sold alcohol. There are many different types of alcoholic drinks such as beer, wine and spirits (whiskey, vodka, gin etc.).
- Poly drug use or dual use is when two or more drugs are used together, or when problem drinking is combined with problem drug use.

If you would like to know more about the different drugs and their effects, have a look at www.drugs.ie or www.spunout.ie.

Q. Isn't alcohol safe? I thought it helped people to enjoy themselves?

A. The majority of people who drink alcohol do so in a social way which does not have a negative effect on the person or their family life. People drink to socialise, 'get in the mood', have fun and relax. Alcohol acts as a sedative, which means it will make you more chilled out or relaxed.

However, the bad news is that too much of it can take away a person's judgement and affect the decisions they make.

Sometimes people drink alcohol to forget their problems and help them to cope, but this does not work. The problems will still be there when they have stopped drinking and may even be worse.

Did You Know...?

Alcohol, as well as many other legal and illegal drugs, can be addictive.

Many people who take an alcoholic drink will lead normal, unaffected lives. However, for some, their drinking can get out of control, their use of alcohol increases and they can become binge drinkers or become addicted (sometimes called alcoholism).

- Binge drinking is drinking more than the safe amount... in other words too much, too fast.
- Addiction or dependence means a person relies on alcohol to live their daily lives and has a physical (the body) or psychological (the mind) dependence on alcohol. See **[Why do people use drugs and alcohol and when does it become addiction?](#)** for more info.

Q. What effects do drinking or taking drugs have on people?

A. The effects of drugs and alcohol on a person depend on what type of substance has been taken. Some people drink or take drugs for the 'feel good' factor but others might continue to use even though it is not an enjoyable experience. Different people may experience different effects.

- Depending on the substance used, your parent may appear to be more relaxed or become more chatty and outgoing, they may seem happy and laugh a lot.

- On the other hand, it could be that when your Mum or Dad is under the influence of drugs or alcohol they may seem tired or sleepy, upset, anxious or worried.
- Alcohol and drugs can cause people to be distant and seem like they don't care or they may not be really focused on what is happening around them.
- At other times, the drug or alcohol can make a person seem sad and tearful, they may even start crying.
- In some situations, the parent who is taking drugs or alcohol will use emotional blackmail (making people feel guilty, e.g. 'If you loved me you would do such and such') or make grand declarations of love and caring which do not feel genuine, or can be confusing because their behaviour is not matching what they are saying.

When a parent has taken drugs or alcohol they may spend time away from home on 'benders'. A bender is another word used to describe going drinking or taking drugs for blocks of time, such as days or even weeks. Alternatively, the parent may be physically present, but absent in every other way such as being emotionally distant or unable to communicate. It can seem like the person is there in body but not in mind.

Q. What effects might people have the day after taking drugs or alcohol?

A. When people drink too much they can have a **hangover** the next day. A hangover is when a person drinks too much causing **dehydration**. Dehydration is when the body loses more fluid than it should. This will bring a very bad feeling the next day of nausea, tiredness and headache. Sometimes people can feel emotional, anxious, depressed or in bad form when they are hungover.