



Victim Services of Waterloo Region

Fact Sheet on Drug Abuse

What are Drugs?

A drug is “any substance, other than food, which is taken to change the way the body and/or mind function”. Some drugs are legally obtained over the counter, others must be prescribed by a doctor. There are other drugs that must be obtained illegally, such as cocaine and heroin. Regardless of how a drug is obtained, any drug can be abused.

Levels of Drug Use

While the use of a drug in a low level can be harmless, an increased dose may do serious damage – each drug is different. The continuum of drug use is as follows:

- ❑ **No Use**
- ❑ **Experimental Use:** person tries the drug once out of curiosity and may or may not try it again.
- ❑ **Social or Recreational Use:** person uses the drug in an amount or frequency that is not harmful (e.g. a drink at a party).
- ❑ **Medication Used as Directed:** person uses medication, as prescribed, therefore minimizing the risk.
- ❑ **Harmful Use:** person experiences negative consequences of use, e.g. family or work

problems.

- ❑ **Dependence:** person is psychologically and/or physically dependent on the drug, and use continues regardless of the serious problems it generates.

Why do People Use Drugs?

- ❑ **Media and Communications:** Advertisements, television, movies, even the internet can glorify drug abuse as a means of obtaining or maintaining a certain lifestyle. These mediums can also be used to inform people on how to manufacture or use drugs.
- ❑ **Positive Reinforcement:** If a person tries a drug and finds the experience to be a pleasurable one they are more likely to use it again. It may have seemingly positive effects such as loss of pain or inhibition, enhanced performance or increased sleep.
- ❑ **Curiosity:** Drugs are talked about frequently, and many people know someone who abuses them. Curiosity often leads to temptation, which causes many people to experiment with both legal and illegal drugs.

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❑ **Celebration:**

The use of drugs can be part of a family, cultural, religious or social celebration or practice, e.g. cigars and alcohol.

❑ **Emotional Pressures:**

Some people use drugs to relieve emotional problems such as anger, stress, depression and anxiety. Others use them to increase self-confidence, as a form of rebellion or as a coping mechanism against traumatic experiences. They can also be used to relieve symptoms of psychiatric illness.

❑ **Social Pressures:**

Peer pressure can be strong, and often people use drugs to "fit in". In some social groups, drug use is a key to social acceptance and non-conforming persons are alienated. Parents and other role models can passively encourage drug use by the consumptions examples they set.

❑ **Previous Drug Use:**

People who regularly use one drug are more likely to use another. Some drugs are gateway drugs, meaning they are more likely to lead to increased drug use. The earlier the drug use begins, the more likely a person is to utilize other drugs and have drug related problems later in life.

❑ **Dependence:**

Once a person becomes dependent upon a drug, it becomes very unpleasant to discontinue use. Many types of drugs, including over-the-counter ones, are capable of causing dependence, and the distress caused by dependence may require medical intervention and assistance to be relieved.

When Drugs Become a Problem

There are many different types of drug problems, all with potential social, physical, mental, legal, environmental and financial consequences.

❑ **Over Use:** Taking too much of the drug at once or taking it too frequently.

❑ **Using for too Long:** Some drugs should only be taken for short-term use, and can lead to dependence or adverse health effects if taken for longer.

❑ **Use for the Wrong Reason:** Using a drug for a coping mechanism or for the wrong symptom can be dangerous.

❑ **Not Following Directions:** Using a drug without following the label can lead to serious problems. Using someone else's prescription medication or stopping use without the direction of a doctor are also causes of serious difficulties, or death.

❑ **Combining Drugs:** Drug combinations can cause negative effects. Alcohol, herbal or foreign medications and even certain foods can cause adverse effects or death.

❑ **Extremely Dangerous Drugs:** Some drugs are without legitimate uses and run high risks for death and disability. Any use of such a drug is abuse. e.g. PCP angel dust and inhalants such as gasoline.

❑ **Commonly Abused Drugs:** Common drugs, such as caffeine, alcohol and tobacco can be easily obtained and abused. Marijuana is frequently abused by young people, as are sleeping aids by the elderly.

For more information see the drug and drug type specific fact sheets or ask Police for info.



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