

Drugs

Contents:

[Legal drugs](#)

[Street drugs](#)

[Legal highs](#)

[Possible side effects and dangers of drugs](#)

[Impact of specific street drugs](#)

[Risks](#)

[Seeking help](#)

[Sources of Further Information and Advice](#)

Legal drugs

People have experimented with mind altering substances throughout the ages. We have legal drugs in coffee, caffeine tablets; caffeine-based soft drinks, alcohol and cigarettes as well as prescribed medicines such as sleeping tablets, pain killers, stimulants and tranquilizers. There is a resurgence of interest in medical herbalism such as the use of St John's Wort for mild depression. There are also now many self-help books on how food can influence our mood, such as "Potatoes not Prozac" by Kathleen Desmaisous or "The Food and Mood Handbook" by Amanda Geary. Any of these can be useful in moderation but there can be some health risks - it is not unusual for students to have debilitating panic attacks at exam time which have been exacerbated by overuse of caffeinated soft drinks, caffeine tablets or coffee.

Street Drugs

Illegal street drugs are present in our society and it is noticeable that there are fashions in drug use where they may be associated with particular lifestyles or subcultures. All young people, including students, are likely to come across street drugs at some point. The majority of occasional users come to little long-term harm, but some will encounter a significant increase in mental health risks, permanent effects on the brain and memory and some risk death as a direct result of their drug use. The impact of a drug on anyone will depend on its strength, its purity (most street drugs are mixed with fillers which can be dangerous in themselves but ironically drugs that are too pure can kill as the user may not have sufficient tolerance), the individual's metabolism and health and the individual's psychological vulnerability. A history of mental illness in your family could mean that you are more susceptible.

As scientists learn more about brain function, we are now getting more studies showing significant impact on the brain from common street drugs such as cannabis and ecstasy.

Legal Highs

Recently there has been a growing trend in 'legal highs'. These are either chemical or plant-based substances that you can buy which are not listed as banned or illegal substances. These can produce similar effects as cocaine, cannabis or ecstasy. Legal highs are particularly dangerous as they can contain chemicals which have not been tested and many of them are not fit for human consumption. Some drugs marketed as legal highs actually contain ingredients that are illegal to possess.

Other risks:

- You increase the risk to yourself if you combine alcohol with any legal or illegal substance that causes a high.
- Effects of legal highs can include reduced inhibitions, drowsiness, excited or paranoid states, coma, seizures and, in a few cases, death.
- Because the chemical ingredients in a branded product can be changed without you knowing, the risks are unpredictable.
- Even drugs that look similar or have similar names may be of varying strengths and have different effects.

If you have taken a legal high and you feel you are having a serious negative reaction please seek help from your local [A&E department](#).

Possible side effects and dangers of drugs

All drugs (medicinal as well as illegal) have the potential for unwanted, and often unexpected, effects. They are usually substance and individual specific.

- The effects of a drug may vary according to the mental state of the person taking it. A strong mood-altering substance may trigger or exacerbate an underlying emotional instability.
- Pleasurable effects followed by less pleasant after-effects may tempt someone into repeated use. Crack cocaine, for instance, can tempt someone into repeated use very quickly because it gives a very strong but short-term 'burst' of euphoria followed by an equivalently intense coming-down which may include high anxiety as well as physical malaise. In addition, physiological tolerance may build up with some drugs so that more of the drug is needed to induce the same desired effect.
- Withdrawal from a drug after regular or high dosage use may lead to physical symptoms i.e. there may be a physical dependency on the drug.
- Drugs may interact with each other (including legal ones such as alcohol). Some mixtures may even prove life-threatening.
- With any illicit drug there is no quality control so there is a constant danger of variable strength and of adulteration with undesirable substances. Sources of cannabis may vary in potency by 10-fold, from 2% hash to 20% skunk. In the case of heroin in particular, it is the unexpectedly pure drug which may kill someone who has insufficient tolerance.
- Injecting drugs involves the risk of introducing infections directly into the bloodstream. Sharing of needles is particularly dangerous as it may lead to cross-infections (e.g. HIV and hepatitis).
- Drugs taken during pregnancy may damage the foetus.

Impact of specific street drugs

It is not the purpose of this webpage to give detailed information on all street drugs as this is better obtained from the websites listed below. However, the following is a brief summary of current information which may be of particular interest to students:

Substances used

Recreational drugs can be classified as stimulants, depressants and hallucinogens. Some drugs however can overlap these categories, for example ecstasy is both a stimulant and a hallucinogen, and, while low grade cannabis (hash) works as a depressant, stronger versions such as skunk may also have hallucinogenic properties.

Stimulants

Stimulants work by increasing neural activity in the brain. They have the short-term effect of making one feel lively, talkative, confident and euphoric. They can be attractive to club and party-goers because they enhance sensory experience and postpone the need for sleep. As their effect wears off, however, they can leave you feeling restless, irritable or washed out. There may, therefore, be a temptation to avoid these 'coming down' feelings by taking more of the drug.

Long-term use or high doses can lead to extreme agitation, insomnia, delusions, hallucinations and paranoia particularly in susceptible individuals.

The most common stimulants are:

- Amphetamines (speed).
- Ecstasy (a hallucinogenic amphetamine).
- Tobacco.
- Anabolic steroids (used illegally to enhance strength and performance in sport).
- Amyl nitrate (poppers).
- Cocaine.
- Crack cocaine.

Depressants

Depressants work by depressing the central nervous system. They can therefore induce a state of relaxation or sedation as well as reducing the intensity of pain and of emotions such as fear, anger or anxiety.

They can also have short term effects of:

- Reducing intellectual ability and the ability to concentrate or retain information
- Reducing motivation and energy
- Reducing manual dexterity e.g. the ability to operate machinery, drive, climb or swim

Examples of depressants are:

- Opiates such as heroin/diamorphine (smack), morphine, pethidine and methadone.
- Benzodiazepines (tranquillizers such as Valium and Temazepam). These may be prescribed for short-term to combat anxiety, but they also have an illegal market.
- Cannabis (many street names such as hash, dope, weed, gear). Long-term use or high doses may lead to depression, increased anxiety, an inability to deal effectively with emotions, short-term memory loss and insomnia.
- Alcohol.

Regular use of some of these drugs (e.g. opiates and benzodiazepines) may lead to physical dependency since withdrawal may result in unpleasant physical symptoms. There is also the danger of a serious, or even fatal, overdose due to the depressing of physical systems such as the heart and lungs.

Hallucinogens

These drugs enhance sensory perceptions - sight, sound, smell and touch.

On a pleasant 'good trip' a person may experience increased self-awareness, and mystical or ecstatic feelings. On a 'bad trip' there may be unpleasant feelings of disorientation, panic, and/or paranoia. These may last several hours. People can also suffer 'flashbacks' where they relive experiences when tripping. This can be intensely disorientating and anxiety provoking.

A bad trip is more likely in someone who is already anxious, depressed or unstable, or who takes the drug in an insecure environment. It may not be affected by previous experiences of the drug or by dosage.

Hallucinogens include:

- LSD
- Hallucinogenic stimulants such as Ecstasy (see above)
- Magic mushrooms
- High potency cannabis such as 'skunk'

Risk

As well as the health and psychological risks listed above, there are legal risks involved. Possession and supply of drugs covered by the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) is against the law.

Seeking help

Regular or heavy drug use may be a symptom of a deeper problem. People may turn to drugs in an attempt to avoid confronting problems or internal distress. This may work in the short term but can come to a severe financial, psychological, social, legal or physical consequence. It is also likely to affect your studies and achievements.

Sources of Further Information and Advice

Turning Point: 0330 303 6000

55-56 Woodgate, Loughborough, LE11 2TG

LLreferrals@turning-point.co.uk

Support for people suffering from drug and alcohol problems. Drop-in services, one to one support, telephone advice, a variety of additional specialist services for advice and for drug treatment.

Talk to Frank (National Drugs Helpline): 0300 123 6600

(Telephone lines in many languages are available).

Text - 82111

Email (see website) Confidential, you can use a nickname.

Confidential advice from trained advisors. Lots of information.

DrugScope

Drug and alcohol treatment, drug education and prevention and criminal justice.

Know the Score

Drugs facts, help and support.

National Union of Students

General information based on DrugScope

ADFAM National Helpline: 020 7553 7640

admin@adfam.org.uk

Confidential support and information helpline for families and friends of drug users.

Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity team: 01509 228338

studentwellbeing@lboro.ac.uk

To book an appointment with any of our services within Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity (including the Counselling Team, Mental Health Support Team and the Wellbeing Advisers), please complete [the referral form](#).