

# **What You Need to Know About Drugs**

Drugs are chemicals that change the way a person's body works. You've probably heard that drugs are bad for you, but what does that mean and why are they bad?

## **Medicines Are Legal Drugs**

If you've ever been sick and had to take medicine, you already know about one kind of drugs. Medicines are legal drugs, meaning doctors are allowed to prescribe them for patients, stores can sell them, and people are allowed to buy them. But it's not legal, or safe, for people to use these medicines any way they want or to buy them from people who are selling them illegally.

## **Cigarettes, Alcohol, and Marijuana**

Cigarettes and alcohol are two other kinds of legal drugs. (In the United States, adults 18 and older can buy cigarettes and those 21 and older can buy alcohol.) But smoking and excessive drinking are not healthy for adults and are off limits for kids. Marijuana is generally an illegal drug, but some states allow doctors to prescribe it to people for certain illnesses, and some have passed laws making it legal to sell marijuana to adults for personal use.

## **Illegal Drugs**

When people talk about a "drug problem," they usually mean abusing legal drugs or using illegal drugs, such as marijuana, ecstasy, cocaine, LSD, crystal meth, and heroin to get "high."

## **Why Are Illegal Drugs Dangerous?**

Illegal drugs aren't good for anyone, but they are particularly bad for a kid or teen whose body is still growing. Illegal drugs can damage the brain, heart, and other important organs. Cocaine, for instance, can cause a heart attack — even in a kid or teen.

While using drugs, people are also less able to do well in school, sports, and other activities. It's often harder to think clearly and make good decisions. People can do dumb or dangerous things that could hurt them — or other people — when they use drugs.

## **Why Do People Use Illegal Drugs?**

Sometimes kids and teens try drugs to fit in with a group of friends. Or they might be curious or just bored. Someone may use illegal drugs for many reasons, but often because they help the person escape from reality for a while. A drug might — temporarily — make someone who is sad or upset feel better or forget about problems. But this escape lasts only until the drug wears off.

Drugs don't solve problems, of course. And using drugs often causes other problems on top of the problems the person had in the first place. Somebody who uses drugs can become dependent on them, or **addicted**. This means that the person's body becomes so accustomed to having this drug that he or she can't function well without it.

Once someone is addicted, it's very hard to stop taking drugs. Stopping can cause withdrawal symptoms, such as vomiting (throwing up), sweating, and tremors (shaking). These sick feelings continue until the person's body gets adjusted to being drug free again.

## **Can I Tell If Someone Is Using Drugs?**

If someone is using drugs, you might notice changes in how the person looks or acts. Here are some of those signs, but it's important to remember that depression or another problem could be causing these changes.

Somebody using drugs might:

- lose interest in school
- change friends (to hang out with kids who use drugs)
- become moody, negative, cranky, or worried all the time
- ask to be left alone a lot
- have trouble concentrating
- sleep a lot (maybe even in class)
- get in fights
- have red or puffy eyes
- loss or gain weight
- cough a lot
- have a runny nose all of the time?

## **What Can I Do to Help?**

If you think someone is using drugs, the best thing to do is to tell an adult that you trust. This could be a parent, other relative, teacher, coach, or school counselor.