

Possible Signs of Teen Substance Use

- WATCH FOR SIGNS

Teenage years are often characterized by the fast pace of change. It is a time when choices are made and interests are developed. It is when personal style is defined and the body matures into adulthood. This typically translates into frequent changes in habits, social circles and activities. All these changes, including the possible use of drugs, offer signs that can be monitored by parents.

It is very important that you be aware of the signs that accompany drug use. This requires some degree of knowledge. You should watch for changes in behaviour, performance in school, and social activities.

Although some of these changes could simply be a normal part of being a teenager, you should consider the following as possible signs that your teenager could be using drugs.

1. Changes in social circle

Drug use can bring about a dramatic effect on social habits. Your teenager may start neglecting old friends in favour of people he or she doesn't bring home or talk about. He or she may receive phone calls that trigger sudden changes in behaviour or plans. There may be callers that hang up when you answer and callers who refuse to leave messages.

2. Changes in personal priorities

If your teenager turns away from family life, you should find out why. If a teenager involved in sports or arts suddenly abandons these interests you should also find out why. Watch for any radical changes in your teenager's interests.

3. Changes in academic performance

Lower interest in school is a clear sign there is an issue to be addressed. That issue may or may not be related to drugs. Either way, it should be investigated. Signs to monitor include lower grades, attendance problems and teacher reports about the motivation and behaviour of the teenager.

4. Changes in behaviour

While privacy is important to teenagers, take note if your teenager becomes highly secretive or if their need for privacy becomes extreme. Changes in personality traits should be followed closely, such as unusual outbursts, sudden mood swings and unprovoked hostility. As well, signs of depression and withdrawal are usually not without basis.

5. Changes in health

You should watch for any sudden changes in sleeping and eating patterns. Weight loss is also a danger sign. These issues warrant attention even if they are not drug related. Some drugs will cause insomnia, leaving the person tired at odd times, and reduce appetite. Different substances can have different effects on the body.

6. Physical clues

There are certain objects and equipment that are associated with drug use. Examples are pipes for smoking, small spoons and other common objects such as baby soothers and surgical masks. While they are not illegal, they can be a sign of drug use. They are often found in shops that sell counterculture art, music, clothing and other items. They are also available on the Internet and by mail order.

Paraphernalia

Equipment that can be associated with drug use includes:

- pipes for smoking including bongos or large water pipes and pipes made from common objects such as cans or bottles;
- roach clips (small clip used to hold a marijuana cigarette or "joint");
- rolling papers for making marijuana cigarettes;
- razor blades, straws, small tubes and/or rolled paper (such as paper money) used when snorting powder;
- syringes, needles and spoons;
- bandanas or belts that are used to constrict the veins prior to injection;

- bottles of eye drops that mask bloodshot eyes or dilated pupils;
- pacifiers and lollipops (used because of teeth grinding and involuntary jaw clenching);
- candy necklaces or bags of small candies used to hide pills; and
- glow sticks, mentholated rub and surgical masks (used to overstimulate the user's senses).

If you suspect a problem, take action

Take immediate action if you suspect your teenager is using drugs. Talk directly with your teen about it. If you feel that you need help, there are plenty of resources available. You can talk with your family doctor or your teen's school counsellor. You can also call the help lines listed at the end of this booklet. Or you can visit drugprevention.gc.ca for more information, including links to services available to you in your area.

There is no easy answer or single solution if you find that your teenager has used an illegal drug. Remember, as a parent, you have an influence on your teen's behaviour. Despite what they say or do, your children look to you for support, encouragement and guidance.

For more information contact the Counselling Centre of East Algoma at 848-2585