

# How bad is my teen's drinking or drug use?

*It's so hard to think about your son or daughter using drugs or drinking. It's easy to panic and assume the worst. Not all teens who use drugs continue to do so or have their lives fall apart because of their use. Not all kids who drink develop drinking problems. In fact, most don't.*

This article outlines how alcohol and drug problems develop—usually over a period of time—from not being a problem to actual addiction.

## **When does use become harmful? Understanding the stages of alcohol or drug use**

### • *Experimental use*

Some teenagers will try various drugs, including alcohol, out of curiosity or peer pressure and decide it's not for them. Others will experiment and then keep using. If you suspect your teen is experimenting, encourage them to meet with a drug counsellor to discuss different drugs and their effects. If your teen is not willing to go, meet the counsellor yourself to help you see what you can do.

### • *Social use*

Some teens like the feeling of being high or having a couple of drinks now and again. They can choose when they use and stop when they want to. When they use, they don't have a lot of negative consequences – they don't blow off school, they don't get in trouble with the law and they aren't spending all their money on alcohol or drugs. They use once in a while and consider their use to be “social.”

### • *Harmful involvement*

Some teens get more involved with using drugs and alcohol. Using becomes the focus of what they do when they party or hang out with others. They begin to have problems with friends, family, school, work and money because of their use. They may no longer be feeling good about their use. When teens use despite the problems it creates, they might be considered “harmfully involved” with drugs.

### • *Dependency*

Some teens actually become addicted or dependent on alcohol or drugs. At this stage their body is physically hooked on the substance, and they might even need it to feel normal. It's also possible to develop a “psychological dependence” on the substance, meaning that the teen thinks they function better when they are high or that they need a drink in order to face certain situations. When teens are addicted, they almost always need help in order to stop using.

You can talk to an addiction counsellor at any time if you have questions or want some ideas about how to talk with your son or daughter about drug use or drinking. For youth who need counselling support, Alberta Health Services offers different levels of treatment to meet individual needs.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.

*Permission to reproduce granted by Alberta Health Services. This is an abbreviated version of an article in the Parent Information Series.*