



Drugs and their effects



The following information is provided to assist you in understanding the effects of drug use and drug dependency and what to do if you find someone suffering from a drug overdose.

For all medical emergencies dial 000 immediately and ask for Ambulance

LEGAL DRUGS

Laws and regulations control the availability, quality and price of 'legal' drugs; for example, tobacco may not be sold to persons under the age of 18.

ILLEGAL DRUGS

The drugs of most concern in the community are those that affect the central nervous system. They act on the brain and can change the way a person thinks, feels or behaves. These drugs are known as 'psychoactive drugs'.

Because they are illegal, there are no price or quality controls on illicit drugs such as heroin and ecstasy. A user can never be sure that the drug they are taking is in fact what they think it is; for example, PMA (parameth-oxyamphetamine), a toxic form of amphetamine, has been sold as 'ecstasy'.

The user also cannot be sure of a drug's strength or purity. Various batches of an illegally manufactured drug may have different mixtures of the drug and additives such as poisons, caffeine or talcum powder.

CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM

There are three main types of drug that affect the central nervous system — depressants, stimulants and hallucinogens.

Depressants

Depressants are drugs that slow down the functions of the central nervous system. Depressant drugs do not necessarily make a person feel depressed. They include:

- > alcohol ('booze', 'grog')
- > cannabis ('pot', 'dope', 'mull')
- > barbiturates, including Seconal, Tuinal and Amytal
- > benzodiazepines (tranquilisers, 'benzos'), Valium, Serepax, Mogadon, Normison and Eupynon
- > GHB (Gamma-hydroxybutyrate), or 'fantasy'
- > opiates and opioids, including heroin ('H', 'smack'), morphine, codeine, methadone and pethidine
- > some solvents and inhalants ('glue', 'chroming'); many are household products.

Abuse of depressants can cause unconsciousness, vomiting and even death. Depressants affect

concentration and coordination. They slow down a person's ability to respond to unexpected situations.

Stimulants

Stimulants act on the central nervous system to speed up the messages to and from the brain.

Stimulants increase heart rate, body temperature and blood pressure. Large quantities of stimulants can 'over-stimulate' the user, causing anxiety, panic, seizures, headaches, stomach cramps, aggression and paranoia. Prolonged use of strong stimulants can mask some of the effects of depressant drugs, such as alcohol, making it difficult for a person to judge their effects.

Stronger stimulants include:

- > amphetamines, including illegal amphetamines ('speed', 'crystal meth', 'ice', 'shabu')
- > cocaine ('coke', 'crack')
- > ecstasy ('E', 'XTC', 'eccy')
- > slimming tablets such as Duromine, Tenuate Dospan and Ponderax.



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Hallucinogens

Hallucinogens affect perception. People who have taken them may believe they see or hear things that aren't really there, or what they see may be distorted in some way. The effects of hallucinogens vary a great deal, so it is impossible to predict how they will affect a particular person at a particular time.

Hallucinogens include:

- > datura
- > ketamine ('K', 'Special K')
- > LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide; 'trips', 'acid', 'microdots')
- > magic mushrooms (psilocybin; 'gold tops', 'mushies')
- > mescaline (peyote cactus)
- > PCP ('angel dust')

Cannabis is an hallucinogen as well as a depressant. Ecstasy can also have hallucinogenic qualities.

Several effects of hallucinogens are similar to those of stimulant drugs.

HOW DO DRUGS AFFECT A PERSON?

The effects of a drug depend on the type of drug, how much is used, how it is taken, the characteristics of the person taking it (body type and mood), the situation or place at which the drug is taken and other drugs used at the same time. Some factors to consider include:

Drugs and pregnancy

Most psychoactive drugs can cross the placenta and affect the unborn child. Heavy and sustained use of some drugs during pregnancy may cause miscarriage, foetal distress or a range of other complications.

Drugs and driving

Driving safety requires mental alertness, clear vision, physical coordination and the ability to react appropriately. Drug use can affect these driving abilities and increase the risk of having a crash. The risk of having an accident is nine times greater when alcohol and drugs are used together than when a driver is drug-free.

One of the most concerning measures of drug-related harm in the community is the death toll. Drug use is a factor in about one in five of all deaths in Australia.

Drug dependence

Drug dependence can be physical or psychological, or both. There are degrees of dependency, from mild dependency to compulsive drug use (addiction). It is impossible to say how long a person must take a drug before they will become dependent.

There is no 'safe' level of drug use. All drugs have the potential to cause harm.

HELPING SOMEONE WHO HAS HAD A DRUG OVERDOSE

- > For cases of drug overdose dial 000 immediately and ask for Ambulance.
- > The ambulance calltaker will tell you what to do and will provide medical instructions until ambulance officers arrive.
- > Be aware of your environment, don't endanger yourself (eg needles, disputes).
- > If the person is unconscious but breathing normally, roll them onto their side.
- > If you know what type and the amount of drugs the person has taken tell the ambulance calltaker and ambulance officers.
- > Give any drug packaging from drugs the person has used to the ambulance officers.
- > Police are only involved when ambulance officers feel endangered, someone dies, or there are other non-drug crimes involved (such as violence or theft).

FIRST AID COURSES

The Ambulance Service of New South Wales encourages everyone to learn first aid. This can give you the confidence to assist when someone is injured or ill. To enrol in a first aid course contact an accredited provider listed with the Workcover Authority.

References:
Ambulance Service of NSW
Australian Drug Foundation

For further information please contact: