

What to do if alcohol or drugs are causing problems in your teen's life

Teens sometimes take risks. At some point, they might use alcohol and/or drugs. Most teens will eventually reduce or stop using alcohol/drugs as they move into adulthood. For some teens, using/misusing alcohol or drugs could become a problem. If you are concerned that your teen is misusing alcohol or drugs, your community has connections to help you find the services you need.

Signs that your teen may need help for an alcohol/drug use problem include:

- difficult relationships with others;
- not attending school;
- drop in school grades;
- not caring about school;
- change in peer group;
- changes in sleep patterns;
- changes in mood; and
- family conflict.

It can sometimes be difficult to tell if your teen has a problem with alcohol/drug use. If you are concerned, call an Addictions Counsellor in your community. An Addictions Counsellor may be able to help your teen figure out if he/she is dependent on alcohol/drugs. If needed, they will work with your teen to develop a plan to address substance use. Counsellors do not judge or criticize, and will make decisions *with* your teen not *for* your teen.

“By the time teens reach the age of 15, their experience, role models and environment have already formed many of their ideas, attitudes and expectations regarding alcohol.”¹

An Addictions Counsellor may help your teen:

- set and reach goals;
- recognize the risks of alcohol/drug use;
- learn how to deal with difficult situations and solve problems;
- find what he/she is good at;
- deal with relationships and emotions;
- learn how to have safe and caring relationships;

- figure out what leads him/her to using alcohol/drugs, and how to deal with this;
- see that he/she has choices;
- be connected within your community; and
- make future plans and follow through.

Programs and services that are most effective for teens include ones that:

- have youth involved in making decisions;
- are flexible;
- have family involved;
- make connections to the community (such as school, recreation, work, other services);
- teach life skills;
- are non-judgmental; and
- have follow-up services.

Ideally you, your teen and an Addictions Counsellor can work together to help your teen make healthy decisions. With support, teens can learn to reduce or live without alcohol/drugs and make other positive life changes. This includes changing their definition of ‘normal’ teen behaviour to one that doesn’t involve alcohol/drugs.

Bottom line – it’s important for your teen to know how to...

Deal with emotions

Teens sometimes use alcohol/drugs to numb difficult feelings. Becoming healthy involves being comfortable with emotions, and finding ways to let others know what they need.

As a parent/guardian, you can:

- **Help your teen talk about feelings.** Have conversations while doing activities you both enjoy. Talk about your own feelings. Lead by example.
- **Have your family meet regularly.** Ask what activities they are doing, what they are looking forward to, what they are proud of and what concerns they have.
- **Encourage your teen to solve problems.** Try not to solve their problems. Let your teen make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. Be there to give support.

Deal with conflict

Having alcohol/drug problems can affect a teen’s ability to deal with conflict.

As a parent/guardian, you can:

- **Involve your teen.** Have him/her be part of making rules and consequences. This will help him/her consider different views and give him/her some control over what happens. This will also help with ‘buy in’ when rules and consequences are enforced.
- **Give choices.** This gives teens a feeling of control, confidence and independence. For example, use “when/then...” or “if/then...” statements

(e.g., “when you finish your homework, then you can go out with friends” or “if you mow the lawn, then you can watch TV”).

- **Help your teen understand different viewpoints.** He/she will be more likely to listen to you if your “no” is followed by a reason. If the reason does not make sense, maybe the rule needs to be changed.
- **Strive to agree.** If your teen breaks rules on purpose, try to agree on a consequence. Be consistent and follow through.

“The rates of heavy monthly and weekly drinking among youth are almost double those of adults.”²

Give and get support

A teen who is affected by problematic alcohol/drug use may not know what supports the community has or how to access them.

As a parent/guardian, you can:

- **Praise your teen for efforts—big or small.** Tell them exactly what behaviour you expect and will be pleased with. Do not expect 100% success in everything they try. This is unrealistic for anyone.
- **Help your teen explore interests and abilities.** Friends have a strong influence over each other, so encourage your teen to get involved in activities where they are around others who make positive choices in life.
- **Together, find out what supports your community has.** For example, help for

completing school work, getting a job, dealing with bullying, knowing how to eat healthy and getting exercise.

Whom to contact?

Consider being involved if your teen seeks help from an Addictions Counsellor, and find programs to help you get the support *you* need.

Contact your local Addictions/Mental Health Services office, doctor or other health care provider if you need more information. To locate Addictions/Mental Health Services near you:

- visit saskatchewan.ca/addictions;
- check the green pages of your phone book for your local health region’s services;
- visit HealthLine Online at healthlineonline.ca; or
- contact HealthLine at 811 and ask to speak to an Addictions or Mental Health Counsellor.



As a parent, when your teen is struggling with alcohol or drugs, you may feel alone or that you don’t know what to do. Remember that there is help and support available for you and your teen.

NOTE: This material is for information only and should not replace advice from an Addictions or Mental Health Counsellor, doctor or other health care provider.

To access fact sheet sources please contact the Saskatchewan Ministry of Health at (306) 787-7239.

1 & 2 Reducing Alcohol-Related Harm in Canada: Toward a Culture of Moderation (2007) by the National Alcohol Strategy Working Group.