





- *What do you know about drugs?*
- *What would you do if you thought someone you cared about was using drugs?*
- *What would you do if you were offered drugs?*
- *How would you react if you found out that a friend of yours was dealing drugs?*
- *If you are a parent, how would you react if you found something that you thought was drugs in your child's pocket or bag?*

**Research shows that frequently people don't have enough information, or have the wrong information, about drugs.**

**Knowing the facts makes it easier to talk about drugs in an open and informed way. This booklet gives you:**

- *Facts about some common myths.*
- *Details of where to get more information, support and help.*
- *Information on different types of illegal drugs.*

**HE** Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive

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# Understanding drugs

## What do we mean when we talk about drug use?

People use many different kinds of drugs. These drugs may be legal or illegal, helpful or harmful. Every drug has side-effects and risks, but some drugs have more risks than others, especially illegal drugs.

Using drugs can become a problem depending on a number of factors. These are:

**What** drug is used

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**Who** is using the drug  
(especially their mood and personality)

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**Why** they are using the drug

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**Where** and

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**How** they are using the drug

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Different drugs create different problems for different people. These problems need different answers. To begin to understand the problem, you have to know what is happening in the life of the person who is using the drug and what drug they are using.

In this booklet we look at the problem of illegal drug use. The most commonly used illegal drugs are cannabis, ecstasy, heroin and cocaine.

# Why do people use drugs?

Different people use different drugs for different reasons.

There are of course legal drugs which we all come across every day. For example, you may take medicine when you are sick, alcohol to help you relax or coffee to help you stay awake.

What we are talking about in this booklet are illegal drugs. You may experiment with illegal drugs because of curiosity, because your friends are doing it or to escape boredom or worries. You may take certain drugs to change how you feel. You may believe it's a fun or fashionable thing to do.





You may continue to use a drug because you enjoy it, or because it's part of your social life or culture. This is often called 'recreational' drug use.

Sometimes drug use can become an important part of your life. This may be because of emotional, psychological or social problems you are experiencing. Some drugs can make you addicted or dependent, where you lose control over your drug use and feel you cannot function without the drug.

Some people use more than one drug at the same time – this is known as 'polydrug use'. Mixing drugs can be dangerous because the effects and side-effects are added together. This includes mixing illegal drugs with legal drugs such as alcohol or medication. For example, taking alcohol with cocaine increases your risk of irregular heart rhythms, heart attacks and even death.

# Know the facts about drugs

There are no easy answers to the problems caused by drug use, but knowing the facts can help you deal with drugs issues.

**Myth** "All drugs are addictive"

**Fact** Some drugs can create addiction or dependence much quicker than others. There is no evidence that people get 'hooked' after one or two uses, or that everyone who tries a drug will become addicted. Using a drug even once can cause serious problems. Addiction depends on the what, who, why, where and how of drug use.

**Myth** "Only drug addicts have a problem"

**Fact** Addiction or dependency is not the only problem drugs can cause. Some people have problems the first time they use a drug, or problems may develop as you use them more often. Drug use can affect your physical and mental health, your family life, relationships and your work or study. Using illegal drugs can also get you into trouble with the law or cause money problems.

**Myth** "All illegal drugs are equally harmful"

**Fact** Different drugs can harm you in different ways. Some drugs, such as heroin, are regarded as more dangerous because they have a higher risk of addiction and overdose, or because they are injected. However, each drug has its own risks.



Drugs are often described as being either 'hard' or 'soft' but it's not as simple as that.

**Myth** "My teenager is moody and losing interest in school – they must be on drugs"

**Fact** Parents often ask how they can tell if their child is using drugs. But you should be careful of lists of signs and symptoms. Many of the possible signs, such as mood swings or loss of interest in hobbies or study, are also normal behaviour for teenagers. It's better to talk to them before jumping to conclusions.

If you find that your child is taking drugs, don't panic. Find out the details of their drug taking – what they have taken, for how long and why. Speaking with a trained professional can help you decide what action to take.

You can help your child develop a sensible attitude towards drugs, by showing a sensible attitude to your own use of drugs – particularly legal drugs such as alcohol and medication.

**Myth** "Young people are tempted to try drugs by pushers"

**Fact** Most young people are introduced to illegal drugs by a friend or someone they know. In many cases drugs are 'pulled' rather than 'pushed' – the person asks for it themselves, often out of curiosity.

# It's good to talk ...and listen!

Talking about drugs and drug use can be difficult. You may feel uncomfortable talking about drugs because you don't know enough about the subject. You may not be confident that you can talk to and influence the other person. You don't have to do this alone, you can get further information and support.

If someone you know is taking drugs or you think they are taking drugs:

- *Listen to them – it is important to understand and respect how they feel;*
- *Keep the lines of communication open; and*
- *Look for more information before you do anything.*

## Where can I get more information and support?

The Health Service Executive (HSE) has staff trained in drugs education in your area. They also have counselling and treatment services. A number of voluntary agencies also provide education, counselling and treatment throughout the country.

To get information on your local services:

- Freephone:     **Drugs helpline**  
                      **1800 459 459**  
                      (Monday – Friday, 9am to 5pm)
- Web:             **[www.drugs.ie](http://www.drugs.ie)**
- Text:            **Drugs to 51900**



## If you or someone you know needs immediate help:

If you find someone drowsy or unconscious:

- *Stay calm.*
- *Phone the emergency services on **999 or 112.***
- *Make sure their airway is clear.*
- *Turn them on their side and try not to leave them alone. Take care when turning them to avoid contact with needles or sharp objects.*
- *Give any powders, tablets or other things you find to the ambulance staff.*

## If you think someone has taken drugs and needs help:

- *Contact your local doctor – listed under General Practitioner (GP) in the phone book.*
- *Go to or phone the Emergency department (A&E) of your nearest hospital.*
- *Phone the emergency services on **999 or 112.***

# What you need to know about drugs

There are five main kinds of drugs that can change your mood or how you behave. Most of these drugs come under a law called the Misuse of Drugs Act. They are known as 'controlled drugs' and are listed in different groups called schedules.

The schedules group drugs according to how useful they are and what is needed to control their use. For example, schedule one covers drugs that have no medical use – drugs such as LSD and 'designer drugs' such as ecstasy.

This is different from the UK where drugs are grouped in classes (A, B, C) according to how the law deals with them.





- **Depressants**, such as alcohol, can be used to calm the mind, relieve anxiety and can cause sleepiness.
- **Sedatives** and minor tranquillisers include the benzodiazepine drugs, such as valium. These are often prescribed to calm you down or to help you sleep at night. They have the same general effects as depressants but they cause addiction in a different way.
- **Opiates**, also known as narcotic analgesics, are strong painkillers that produce feelings of euphoria (happiness) and sleepiness. The opiates include morphine, heroin and methadone.
- **Stimulants** are drugs that make you feel more awake, alert, energetic and confident. Stimulant drugs include cocaine and amphetamines.
- **Hallucinogens** are drugs that produce strange and intense visions called hallucinations. These drugs include LSD (acid) and magic mushrooms.

Depressants and sedatives are sometimes called 'downers' and stimulant drugs are sometimes called 'uppers'. Many drugs don't belong to just one type. For example, cannabis can have depressant effects as well as causing euphoria and ecstasy has both stimulant and hallucinogenic effects.



# Cannabis

Slang names include Hash, Blow, Shit, Dope, Grass, Weed.

Cannabis is a natural plant and is used in three main forms. The most common type is called resin, which comes as solid dark-coloured lumps or blocks. Less common are the leaves and stalks of the plant, called grass or weed. The third kind, cannabis oil, is rarely seen in Ireland.

Cannabis is usually rolled with tobacco into a 'joint' or 'spliff' and smoked, but it can also be cooked and eaten.

**Effects** – Getting 'stoned' on cannabis makes you feel relaxed, talkative and happy. Some people feel time slows down and they also report a greater appreciation of colours, sounds and tastes. You can develop strong cravings for food, called 'the munchies'.

**Side-effects** – Cannabis can affect your memory and concentration and can leave you tired and lacking motivation. If you are not used to cannabis or you use a stronger type than you are used to you can feel anxiety, panic or confusion. You may have delusions or hallucinations.

**Risks** – Many people consider cannabis to be a relatively safe drug. But research shows that long-term users can find it hard to control their use of the drug and may become addicted. Smoking cannabis increases your risk of heart disease and cancers such as lung cancer and may also affect your fertility. In people who have underlying mental health problems, cannabis use may trigger schizophrenia. In Ireland it is the second most common drug found in the systems of drink drivers, after alcohol.



# Ecstasy

Slang names include E, Doves, Mitsubishi, Yokes, Shamrocks.

Ecstasy is usually made in back-street laboratories in some European countries. It is sold mainly as tablets which have different logos or designs on them. Sometimes ecstasy tablets can contain other drugs and substances.

**Effects** – Ecstasy can make you feel more alert and in tune with your surroundings. You feel happy and calm and have a warm feeling towards other people. Sounds, colours and emotions are more intense. You have more energy which allows you to dance for long periods of time.

**Side-effects** – Your body temperature, blood pressure and heart-rate can rise. Other physical effects include muscle pain, nausea, jaw stiffness and teeth grinding. You may experience severe sweating, shaking and palpitations. You can feel dehydrated, confused and tired.

**Risks** – Most legal drugs are tested on animals first, but ecstasy users are human guinea pigs. Research already shows that regular weekend users experience a mid-week 'crash' that can leave them feeling tired and depressed, often for days. It could be years before we know the long-term effects but some users may be at risk of developing mental health problems later in life. Deaths from ecstasy are quite rare, but can be due to heatstroke, heart attacks or asthma attacks.



# Heroin

Slang names include Gear, Smack, Junk, H.

Heroin is made from morphine, one of the drugs that comes from the opium poppy. It is used by injecting or by smoking, known as 'chasing the dragon'.

**Effects** – Injecting heroin gives a quick rush of excitement followed by a peaceful, dreamlike feeling. You feel warm, relaxed and drowsy.

Pain, aggression and your sex drive are all reduced.

**Side-effects** – The side-effects of heroin and other opiates (such as morphine and methadone) include constipation and weaker breathing. However, most of the dangers of heroin come from overdose and from injecting the drug.

**Risks** – What is sold on the streets as heroin often contains other substances, such as sugar, flour, talcum powder or other drugs. These substances may seem harmless, but if you inject them they can cause huge damage to your body, such as blood clots, abscesses and gangrene. HIV and hepatitis B and C can be spread through sharing needles. Using heroin regularly will often lead to addiction, especially if you inject.

*Methadone is used as a replacement drug to treat heroin addiction. It comes in the form of a green liquid, which you drink once a day to keep away the cravings for heroin. The most serious risk from methadone is death by overdose.*



# Cocaine

Slang names include Coke, Charlie, Snow.

Cocaine is a white powder made from the leaves of the coca plant, which grows mainly in South America. It is usually used by snorting the powder up the nose. 'Crack' is not a different drug but a more addictive form of cocaine. Crack, also called 'rock', 'stone' or 'free-base', is usually smoked. Cocaine is sometimes injected or eaten.

**Effects** – Cocaine is a powerful stimulant. It makes you feel more alert and energetic and also less hungry or thirsty. These effects can last for up to 20 minutes after each use. Smoking crack cocaine gives a shorter but more intense high.

**Side-effects** – Due to its powerful effects, cocaine users are often left craving more. Large doses can make you exhausted, anxious and depressed, and sometimes aggressive.

**Risks** – Snorting cocaine can cause permanent damage to the inside of your nose. Cocaine use can damage your heart and lungs, and high doses can cause death from heart attacks or blood clots. Taking cocaine with alcohol increases the risk of heart attack and death. Eating cocaine can damage bowel tissue. The depression that follows the high can be severe and can lead to suicide attempts. With long-term or binge use, the excitement caused by cocaine can turn to restlessness, sleep loss and weight loss. Some people develop a paranoid psychosis where they may be violent. The strong cravings for cocaine, especially crack, can make you want to take the drug all the time and you can lose control of your drug use.



# Amphetamines

Slang names include Speed, Whizz, Uppers.

Amphetamines are a group of stimulant drugs, some of which were used in the past as slimming tablets. They usually come as a white-grey powder, sold in folded paper packages called 'wraps'. They are usually swallowed but can also be injected or snorted. A type known as 'ice' or 'crystal' can be smoked.

**Effects** – These depend on how you take the drug. A small dose by mouth makes you feel more alert and energetic. Higher doses that you inject or smoke give a rush of pleasure. Some speed users go on binges and become overactive and talkative.

**Side-effects** – As with other stimulant drugs, you experience a crash after the high caused by the drug. High doses of amphetamines can cause panic, paranoia and hallucinations. With long-term use, you can develop a condition known as 'amphetamine psychosis', with symptoms like schizophrenia. The paranoia can cause you to become violent if you believe you are being threatened or persecuted.

**Risks** – Amphetamine psychosis can continue after you have stopped using the drug. If you become aggressive or violent, you could get into dangerous situations. The risks from injecting are the same as other drugs, such as heroin.



# Solvents

Slang name 'glue sniffing'

Solvents include products found in most homes, such as glues, paint thinner, nail polish remover, lighter fuels and aerosol sprays such as deodorants. You can inhale them from a soaked rag, coat sleeve or directly from a bottle. You spray aerosols directly into your mouth. Solvent abuse is most common among teenagers. For most teenagers it is a passing fad, but it can cause them huge problems at school and at home.

**Effects** – Inhaling solvents can give a high or 'buzz' which is like feeling drunk. The effects usually wear off after about half an hour. You may look drunk, with slurred speech, staggering, giggling and lack of control and you can feel drowsy afterwards.

**Side-effects** – Your judgement can be affected and you can become aggressive. Hallucinations, vomiting and blackouts are also common. You usually have a hangover after use, with headache and poor concentration.

**Risks** – Death from solvent abuse is rare but it can happen for a number of reasons and can happen the first time you do it. Under the influence of solvents you are more likely to have accidents. You may also choke or suffocate – on the solvent you spray into your lungs, on your vomit or on the materials you use to help inhale the solvent. Many solvents can also cause heart failure.



# LSD

Slang name Acid.

LSD usually comes as tiny tablets known as 'dots' or 'tabs', in or on small squares of paper or cardboard. Tabs usually have pictures or logos on them. You swallow the tabs.

**Effects** – LSD is a hallucinogenic drug. About one hour after taking a tab, it causes a 'trip' where your surroundings look different, with colours, sounds and objects appearing unreal or abnormal. During a trip you may have visions and hear voices and time seems to slow down or speed up. The effects can last for around 12 hours.

**Side-effects** – It's hard to predict what kind of trip you will have. During a bad trip, you may feel terrified, feel you are losing control, going mad or dying. A bad trip is more likely if you are already feeling anxious or depressed before taking the drug.

**Risks** – A bad trip can trigger mental illness in some people. Good trips can also be dangerous, for example if you believe you can fly or walk on water. You can also get flashbacks, where you feel you are back on a trip for a short period of time, during the weeks and months after a trip. These flashbacks can be distressing.

Magic mushrooms are hallucinogenic mushrooms that grow in the wild. You can eat them raw or cooked, or made into a tea. The effects of magic mushrooms are similar to a mild, shorter LSD trip. As with LSD, you can have bad trips that could be frightening. There is also the risk that you might eat poisonous mushrooms by mistake, thinking they are magic mushrooms.



## Other drugs associated with the dance or clubbing scene

### **Poppers**

Chemical names are amyl nitrite, butyl nitrite. Poppers are chemicals that come in liquid form, usually in small bottles. You inhale the vapour from the bottle through your nose.

**Effects** – Poppers cause a rush that lasts for about five minutes. Your blood pressure falls and your heart pumps faster. You may feel an increase in sexual arousal and a greater sense of enjoyment of music and dancing.

**Side-effects** – These drugs can make you feel sick and dizzy, and sometimes cause blackouts.

**Risks** – Poppers are especially dangerous for people with heart or breathing problems. The liquid can be poisonous if you swallow it.

### **Ketamine**

Slang names include Vitamin K, Special K, Kit-Kat.

Ketamine is a powerful tranquilliser and anaesthetic used on animals. You can take it as a tablet or snort it as a powder. It causes hallucinations, aggressive behaviour, blackouts and temporary blindness.

### **GHB**

Chemical names are sodium oxybate or gammahydroxybutyrate. Slang names include GBH, liquid ecstasy.

Despite the slang name of liquid ecstasy, GHB is a totally different chemical to ecstasy with different effects. It is an anaesthetic drug that can very quickly make you unconscious.

# Know the facts about drugs



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