

**Ecstasy**

What Is Ecstasy?

Webster’s dictionary defines ecstasy as “great joy; rapture; a state of being overpowered with emotion, especially joy; the condition of being beside oneself with feeling.” Sounds great, doesn’t it? Ecstasy is also the name of a drug, and it has become so popular among teens in recent years because of the joyous feeling it creates. In 2019 (the most recent year for which data was available), roughly 3.6 percent of high school students reported using ecstasy at least once during their life, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)’s High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

Ecstasy, also called molly, has grown in popularity among young people who go to nightclubs or dance parties. It’s talked about in pop and hip-hop songs when singers refer to “molly.” It’s easy to see why a drug that makes you feel euphoric (happy and carefree), excited, and confident could become so popular. However, ecstasy definitely has many downsides. It is an illegal drug. It has the potential for misuse because it is very addictive. Ecstasy can cause severe physical and emotional side effects as well. Worst of all, ecstasy can kill you.

**Ecstasy, the Drug**

You have probably heard conflicting messages about drugs. Your parents or teachers may be telling you that drugs are harmful and to just say no, whereas your friends are saying, “Go ahead and try it.” Do not be confused or misled. Get the facts for yourself. The decision you make could affect you for the rest of your life. It is up to you.

Drugs are non-food substances that people use to change the way their bodies normally work. For the most part, drugs that have accepted medical uses and no serious side effects are considered legal. Substances such as caffeine and aspirin fall into that category. Alcohol and tobacco are also legal but they can be abused. On the other hand, drugs such as heroin and cocaine that have no accepted medical value, or drugs that are very harmful or addictive, are usually illegal. MDMA is an illegal drug with no accepted medical use.

Some drugs come from natural sources, such as plants or mushrooms, while others are created artificially with chemicals. MDMA (short for the chemical substance 3,4-methylenedioxy-methamphetamine) is a synthetic (human-made) drug created in laboratories. Drugs are classified according to their effects and chemical makeup. For example, alcohol is a depressant, or “downer,” because it slows down the normal activity of the body when consumed. Caffeine, on the other hand, is a stimulant, or “upper,” because it speeds up the body’s activities. Drugs that affect the mind or behavior are known as psychoactive drugs. Some psychoactive drugs cause users to see images or hear sounds that don’t really exist. This sensory experience is called a hallucination. A drug that causes hallucinations is called a hallucinogen.

MDMA, or ecstasy, is a psychoactive drug. It is classified as a hallucinogen because it can cause distortions in how you see things. It also acts like a group of stimulants called amphetamines. Like amphetamines, ecstasy speeds up the body’s activities.

Drugs also differ in the way they are taken and in how much they cost. In the case of MDMA, it is often taken orally (through the mouth) but it can also be snorted (inhaled through the nose), taken intravenously (injected through a vein directly into the bloodstream with a syringe), or smoked. The drug comes in the form of a tablet, capsule, or loose powder. Ecstasy is MDMA in a pill form. Molly is MDMA in a powder form or a gel cap. Molly is sometimes called a “purer” form of ecstasy. That is not always the case. Because it is sold as a loose powder, molly is often cut with other drugs, chemicals, and substances, including amphetamine or PCP. When you take molly, you have no idea what you’re getting.

**A Word on Herbal Ecstasy**

Since ecstasy became a popular recreational drug, some companies began marketing herbal look-alikes to teens. With attractive-looking packaging and promises of “a floaty, mind-expanding euphoria,” products like “Herbal Ecstasy” have drawn teens who want to experience a legal and natural high.  Herbal Ecstasy was created as a natural alternative to an illegal drug. It should not, however, be mistaken for MDMA. Herbal Ecstasy is not made with the same ingredients as MDMA, nor does it produce the same high. Its main ingredient, ephedra, is a natural stimulant. It raises your blood pressure and heart rate and makes your skin tingle, but it doesn’t affect your brain chemistry in the same way that MDMA does.

It is important to bear in mind that natural and legal do not necessarily mean safe. In large doses, herbal alternatives to ecstasy can cause severe side effects. Ephedra has been linked to heart attacks, seizures, and death. Ephedra products were once used for weight loss and bodybuilding, but, after the 2001 death of Northwestern University football player Rashidi Wheeler and the 2003 death of Baltimore Orioles pitcher Mark Bechler, both of whom were using ephedra, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) banned the sale of ephedra.

Ecstasy: A History

Although MDMA was developed a century ago, it was not widely used as a recreational drug until the 1980s. A chemical company called Merck first made MDMA in Germany in 1912. It was created as a diet pill, but there is no evidence that suggests that it was ever used or sold for this purpose. In 1965 MDMA was re-created in the United States by a chemist named Alexander Shulgin. He shared his discovery with a small group of friends, including some psychiatrists.

During the 1970s, small groups of psychiatrists began experimenting with MDMA as an aid in psychotherapy (treatment of mental disorders). They believed that patients who took MDMA in a relaxed setting under a doctor’s supervision could benefit from the drug by releasing their fears, enabling them to communicate freely. With the help of MDMA, patients could work through many of their problems. The doctors compared the drug’s effects to Adam’s innocent and blissful state in the biblical Garden of Eden, before he ate the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. For this reason, they called the drug “Adam.”

In the early 1980s, some small drug manufacturers learned of the euphoric feelings caused by MDMA and started producing the drug for recreational use. Some bars in Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas, began selling ecstasy to young professionals and young adults and promoting “ecstasy parties.” The hype over ecstasy began to spread, and the demand and supply for the drug grew rapidly across the nation. At the time, MDMA was not yet categorized as a controlled substance under federal law and was, therefore, still legal.

The Controlled Substances Act of 1970 places all substances that are regulated by federal law into one of five schedules, or categories. Substances are classified according to their safety, medical uses, and potential for abuse. All drugs within the same schedule are subject to the same legal restrictions and penalties.

In June of 1985, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) banned MDMA and placed it in the most restrictive category of illegal drugs. This category, referred to as schedule I, also includes heroin and LSD. Schedule I drugs are considered to have a high potential for abuse and no accepted medical use. It is illegal to make, possess, or sell any Schedule I drug in the United States.

The DEA reportedly classified MDMA as a Schedule I drug because researchers found that a chemically related drug, MDA, caused brain damage in rats. This led researchers to question whether MDA and related drugs like MDMA can cause damage in the human brain. A review of the scientific literature published in the journal *Experimental Neurology* in 2022 concluded that the dangers of MDMA “vary according to the dose, frequency, and duration of the use” of the drug. Researchers found that high dosages and/or prolonged use of MDMA led to persistent, long-term damage to multiple areas of the brain. This is consistent with the street use of MDMA: Ecstasy is often mixed with other toxic substances and is taken at far higher doses than are safe, leading to overdoses, emergency room visits, and potentially long-term brain damage.

Several investigations, however, found that MDMA could be administered at safe levels in clinical settings, leading to a reconsideration of its professional use in psychotherapy. Research published in 2021 found that patients suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) significantly improved after two months of treatment with MDMA. This led the FDA to conduct clinical trials of MDMA-assisted therapy in patients with PTSD. At present, however, any use of ecstasy outside of FDA-approved trials is still illegal in the United States. In July 2023, Australia became the first country to make it legal for approved psychiatrists to prescribe ecstasy for the treatment of mental health conditions such as depression and PTSD. As reported by the journal *Nature,* many experts say that there is still not enough research done on the potential negative side effects of administering ecstasy.

In November 2020 Oregon became the first state in the U.S. to decriminalize the possession and personal use of small amounts of MDMA, as well as other street drugs like LSD, cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and oxycodone. Instead of going to trial and facing possible jail time, people can choose to pay a $100 fee or undergo a substance abuse evaluation and attend a free addiction treatment program.

**Ecstasy and the Rave Culture**

Since the mid-1980s, ecstasy has had a wide appeal among young people who are part of the rave culture. However, its use is not limited to this subculture—people from all walks of life have tried ecstasy.

Raves are makeshift and usually illegal parties that take place in abandoned warehouses, parks, or nightclubs. They can last all night long. Raves are popular among teenagers and college students. They can be very large, with thousands of people in attendance. Many raves are illegal because they are unlicensed. To be considered legal, a dance club must follow strict regulations and obtain various permits and licenses. Unlicensed raves can be very unsafe. Often, too many people are crammed into a space that is not designed to hold so many bodies. There have been cases of unlicensed raves where the floors have caved in beneath the weight of hundreds of dancers. Fire safety regulations are also frequently ignored.

Those who organize raves constantly change locations to avoid being shut down. Details about where the next rave will be held usually spread by word of mouth or, sometimes, through the use of an information hotline. Large parties are also promoted through colorful flyers found at record stores, trendy clothing stores, and skate shops. In recent years, many raves have been held at legal nightclubs that offer special rave nights.

At raves, DJs spin house, techno, trance, and jungle music at up to 180 beats per minute. While each kind of music has a distinct sound, all share a hypnotic rhythm, synthesizer sounds, and a general use of samples. Samples are fragments of other people’s recordings that are mixed into a new recording through the use of electronic equipment. Sometimes “ecstasy lyrics” are layered into the music. For example, one popular dance song called “Energy Flash” whispers “ecstasy” over and over again behind the beat of the music. In this atmosphere, filled with the throbbing intensity of techno music, dancers called “ravers” often turn to drugs like ecstasy to get high and dance all night.

While Americans were using ecstasy even before the rave culture developed in the United States, it is clear that the drug’s popularity increased as raves spread across the country. Ecstasy and electronic music inspired the rave dance culture. Together, the drug and the music help create a trance-like state for dancers. Ecstasy became an important part of the rave dance culture in much the same way that LSD became associated with a lot of the psychedelic music of the 1960s, and speed became associated with punk rock. However, it’s important to remember that many of the people who go to raves do not take drugs. They get a natural high from dancing to good music and socializing with friends.

Not all ecstasy use happens at raves and nightclubs. Some people take ecstasy with friends at someone’s house or at smaller parties. Taking ecstasy in a quieter, familiar setting may make you feel safer, but the effects of the drug don’t change. You still run the risk of suffering serious consequences.

In 2005, North Carolina teenager Erica Hicks died after taking a deadly mixture of ecstasy, cocaine, and methamphetamine at her home during a family birthday party. Her friends testified they took the ecstasy in Erica’s bedroom during the party. They later went to one of the friends’ homes, where she collapsed and died. As cases like Erica Hicks’s made the dangers of MDMA clear, use of ecstasy declined in the 2010s, especially among teens. Between 2015 and 2020, use of ecstasy among young people aged twelve to seventeen declined by over 50 percent, according to the 2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health.

**Dangerous Additives**

MDMA, or ecstasy, is an illegal substance made in underground (secret) laboratories. This means that you can never be certain about its purity or dosage because you don’t know who made it, what was put into it, or how much of the drug was used. Compare this to a legal drug such as medicine for high blood pressure, where you know the company that made a certain product, its ingredients, and potential side effects. Producers of legal drugs must meet strict government quality standards to ensure that their products are pure. On the other hand, those who make illegal drugs like MDMA are not subject to such controls.

As a result, much of the ecstasy sold on the street is not pure MDMA. It is often “cut,” or mixed, with contaminants (other substances) by the dealers who sell it in order to increase their profits. Contaminants may include substances that are easier or cheaper to produce in underground labs, such as cold medicine ingredients, harmless fillers, or even poisons. Other illegal drugs, such as speed, heroin, or LSD, are sometimes found in ecstasy tablets. They are added to make ecstasy more addictive in order to get a buyer hooked. These substances may produce undesired or unexpected effects that can seriously harm you. You can never be sure of what you are taking when you buy ecstasy.

Myths and Facts About Ecstasy

**Myth**: There are no long-term side effects of using ecstasy.

**Fact**: The use of ecstasy can lead to serious long-term loss of brain function, memory impairment, depression, and anxiety. These effects can happen after long periods of use or even after the first use because you can never know for sure what has been added to the pill.

**Myth**: Ecstasy is safer than ever to use.

**Fact**: Ecstasy overdoses are common.

**Myth**: Ecstasy is used only in clubs and at raves.

**Fact**: People have taken ecstasy at a wide variety of locations at all times of day.

**Myth**: Each pill has the same effect.

**Fact**: Because its manufacture is not regulated, ecstasy pills can contain other drugs, many of which are harmful, and can vary greatly in strength.

**Myth**: Users of ecstasy perform better at school.

**Fact:** Studies have shown a decline in the academic performance of students who take ecstasy.

**Myth**: Pregnant woman can take the drug without harming the foetus.

**Fact**: Ecstasy users who are pregnant experience a 15.4% rate of birth defect, which is a significant increase over the expected rate of 2-3%.

**Myth**: Ecstasy won’t affect the way you treat others.

**Fact**: Ecstasy can contribute to relationship problems, jealousy, and paranoia.

**Myth**: The high is great every time.

**Fact**: The euphoric effects of ecstasy diminish with continued regular use.

**Myth**: Ecstasy is not addictive.

**Fact**: Users of the drug experience a psychological dependence. Every drug that interferes with neurotransmitter activity, as ecstasy does with Serotonin, causes physiological changes in the brain that can lead to a rebound effect, tolerance, and craving that are hallmarks of physical addiction.

**Myth**: Ecstasy counteracts the effects of other drugs.

**Fact**: Ecstasy can be lethal in combination with other drugs.

How Does Ecstasy Affect You?

**How Ecstasy Affects the Body**

Ecstasy affects the body’s central nervous system: the brain and the spinal cord. Once swallowed, ecstasy enters the bloodstream and is carried throughout the body. Some reaches the brain, and some is broken down by the liver. Once inside the brain, ecstasy increases the circulation of a substance called serotonin. Serotonin is one of several substances in the brain that regulates your mood and how you feel. It is believed to trigger feelings of love and excitement.

The high that ecstasy produces is the result of the brain being flooded with “feel-good” serotonin. Ecstasy forces the brain to change moods and maintain the high feeling for about four hours. During this time, ecstasy prevents the brain from calming down by blocking the return and storage of serotonin. Normally, serotonin is released for immediate use and then stored for future use.

When the brain is drained of serotonin, the good feeling fades and users “crash.” They feel tired, depressed, and unable to focus. These symptoms can last for days and sometimes even weeks. Ecstasy also decreases your body’s ability to self-regulate its proper hydration. Under the influence of ecstasy people don’t notice whether they are thirsty or not and have thrown off the delicate homeostasis in their bodies by not drinking enough water or by drinking too much water.

**Set and Setting**

Ecstasy is a psychoactive drug. Psychoactive drugs usually make the user’s mood or feelings more intense. A user’s mood may depend on the “set and setting” of the drug experience.

The “set” refers to your mind-set or what you are feeling and thinking at the time of your drug experience. If you are nervous and worried before taking ecstasy, you will probably feel anxious while you’re on it. The “setting” is where you are and who you are with. Taking ecstasy with close friends at home will likely produce a different experience than taking it at a crowded dance party.

**What Does an Ecstasy High Feel Like?**

Users typically begin to feel the effects of a moderate dose of ecstasy (75–100 mg) twenty to sixty minutes after swallowing it. The high lasts about four hours. Some users experience unpleasant physical symptoms, which may include dryness of the mouth, jaw-clenching, faintness, chills, sweating, muscle tension, nausea or vomiting, dilated pupils, and blurred vision. Ecstasy also increases the heart rate, blood pressure, and body temperature.

MDMA takes its popular street name from the word “ecstasy”—a state of intense emotion. That is because users experience an initial rush of euphoria and become very energetic and confident. This rush is followed by calmness and an absence of worry or anger. These feelings generally last two to three hours. Some users say that ecstasy makes them more expressive and outgoing. They may talk and smile a lot or want to hug people around them.

Ecstasy also changes the way you perceive things. Users often report heightened senses of touch, hearing, vision, taste, and smell. For example, simple actions, like running your fingers through your hair, may feel intensely pleasurable and new. Colors and sounds may seem clearer. Raves—with their non-stop music, light and video shows, and hundreds of dancers—lend themselves to the ecstasy experience because they indulge the senses and satisfy a user’s desire to feel close to others.

The Dangers of Ecstasy

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| A saliva drug test can detect Ecstasy (MDMA) use |
| A saliva drug test can detect Ecstasy (MDMA) use.  Mark Dadswell/Getty Images |

Most young people get information about ecstasy by word of mouth in places such as raves, for example. In this way, they learn where to buy it, what its effects are, and whether it can hurt them.

All kinds of rumors have spread about ecstasy. Some people claim that ecstasy taps your spinal fluid and can permanently paralyze you. Others say that ecstasy has no negative side effects. Both of these rumors are false. Ecstasy is not a risk-free drug. While it can give the user an intense high, ecstasy can also cause dangerous side effects and bad “trips,” or experiences. In the mid-2010s, MDMA was responsible for 8 percent of all drug-related emergency visits among selected European hospitals, and for 2 percent in the United States.

**Physical and Psychological Dangers**

Not all teens feel good after taking ecstasy—some feel very anxious, confused, or paranoid while on the drug. They may even have a panic attack—a feeling of overwhelming fear with symptoms, such as nausea, hyperventilation, sweating, and rapid heartbeat. Such attacks can be dangerous because people rarely think clearly or use good judgment when they are so scared.

Teens who are angry or upset before using ecstasy may become moody or violent when they are high because ecstasy tends to exaggerate the user’s mood. Ecstasy can trick your mind into seeing objects differently than they appear. You may “see” trails of blurred images or objects vibrating when the objects are, in fact, still. This distortion can affect your judgment and coordination and lead to serious injury. For example, a person who is dancing on a stage while on ecstasy may become so wrapped up in the flashing of the surrounding lights that they may fall off the stage.

Ecstasy increases your chances of worsening an injury because it decreases your sensitivity to pain. You might hurt yourself while you’re high and not even know it until the effects of the drug wear off. When users come down from an ecstasy high, they often experience body chills. Some people have trouble walking after taking large doses of ecstasy; they feel like they can’t move their legs. Hours later, they may suffer pain in their lower back, joints, and muscles. Some people become irritable when coming off of ecstasy. Many have trouble falling asleep. They may feel very tired the next day and eat very little. It is not unusual to feel listless and depressed for days or weeks.

Some people feel the side effects of ecstasy even weeks after use. They may suffer from memory loss, cognitive problems, depression, anxiety, and even paranoia. Those who already suffer from depression may have long-term anxiety disorders that make them feel nervous all the time. In rare cases, frequent users have suffered long-term consequences, including liver and kidney damage and psychosis—a mental condition in which a person loses touch with reality.

**The Dangers of Mixing Ecstasy With Other Drugs**

A further danger involved in using ecstasy is not knowing exactly what you are taking or how strong it is. Ecstasy is frequently mixed with other drugs or substances that can cause unpredictable reactions. For example, taking ecstasy that is laced with LSD may cause you to hallucinate for up to twelve hours. This experience can be very scary and dangerous if you are not expecting it.

You also don’t know how strong an ecstasy pill will be. Very high doses of ecstasy cause the user to be more alert and excited than euphoric. This may result in a dissatisfying or dangerous high. The only way to be sure of what is in an ecstasy pill is to have it tested. Some nightclubs in the Netherlands have ecstasy testing booths that analyze tablets for contaminants. In the United States, such testing is not available. The bottom line is that you never know what you are getting when you take ecstasy.

Some young people who experiment with ecstasy intentionally mix different drugs to get higher during their trip or to come down easier. This can be very dangerous for many reasons. For example, mixing ecstasy with an amphetamine—a drug often used by ravers to feel more energetic—greatly increases your risk of overheating, particularly in a crowded party setting where you are likely to lose fluids by sweating. Drinking alcohol when you are high on ecstasy is dangerous because both drugs cause dehydration and put a lot of stress on your liver. People who take antidepressants should also avoid taking ecstasy because the combination can cause dangerously high blood pressure.

**Casualties From Ecstasy Use**

Little is known about ecstasy’s long-term effects on the human body and mind. This is partly because it has only recently become popular as a recreational drug. And since it is an illegal drug, the government has allowed limited research on the effects of MDMA in humans. Government-approved studies are currently under way to determine whether MDMA causes brain damage and other long-term health hazards. What is known is that young people have suffered complications after taking ecstasy, and some have died.

Overdosing on ecstasy, or taking too much of the drug for your body to handle, can cause you to vomit continuously, hyperventilate, or pass out. If you have a pre-existing health condition, such as heart, liver, or kidney problems, or if you suffer from asthma, epilepsy, diabetes, or depression, taking ecstasy is a particularly serious health risk. But even young people in good health have suffered permanent damage after taking ecstasy.

One of the most common reasons for complications or death associated with ecstasy use is overheating or heatstroke. Heatstroke occurs when the body’s internal thermometer fails, and the body is exposed to excessive heat. Your body is usually able to maintain a stable internal temperature even when it is very hot outside. If your body temperature rises, your body sweats to cool off. But when you are exposed to high temperatures for a long time, your body may not be able to cool off sufficiently. In extreme cases, heatstroke can lead to seizure, coma, or death.

A growing number of incidents of heatstroke have been linked to ecstasy use at raves. Research suggests that ecstasy itself increases body temperature and can cause dehydration. The stimulant effect of ecstasy can also contribute, indirectly, to causing heatstroke. That is because ecstasy enables users to dance longer than they normally would without feeling tired. They often dance for hours in a hot and crowded area without taking a break to cool down or replenish the fluids they’ve lost from sweating. Ecstasy tends to hide your sense of thirst even when your body is being drained of fluids as you sweat. Since ecstasy can mask the danger signals of overheating, victims may not even try to cool down or drink when they are hot and dehydrated.

Danger signs of heatstroke include an abnormally high body temperature (about 105 degrees), rapid heartbeat, quick and shallow breathing, and abnormally high or low blood pressure. Faintness, confusion, and panic attacks can also occur. If you detect a danger sign of heatstroke, you should retreat immediately to an area that is quiet and cool. Sit or lay down. Rest and drink fluids like water or fruit juice. Let friends or someone you can trust know about your condition so that they can seek emergency medical help, if necessary. You should be treated with cool compresses and fanned as you wait for help to arrive.

In some cases, death has resulted from drinking too much water. Drinking more fluids than your body can get rid of can cause kidney failure and other complications. Drinking lots of water and not urinating is a dangerous sign that your body is not functioning properly. Seek emergency medical help if you detect this danger sign. In 1995 a young woman in England named Leah Betts died from swelling of the brain, which occurred because she drank so much water in order to cool herself down after taking ecstasy.

**Social Dangers**

Teens who use ecstasy think they are on top of the world and can do anything. This attitude can lead to unreasonable and dangerous behavior. For example, you may want to drive your car even though you are high. This kind of poor judgment can get you into a serious accident.

Emotions serve as our radar and give us important information about our environment. A drug that distorts your emotions to the point that you feel as if you have fallen in love with a person that you otherwise would avoid for good reasons can obviously lead to a whole range of risks.

Ecstasy tends to make people feel more emotional and sensual. Some users express affection toward strangers, which may be misinterpreted and taken advantage of. Users may become more open to physical intimacy than they normally would be. They may make decisions that they might regret. It’s easy to forget about protected sex when you’re high. But it won’t be so easy to forget about an unwanted pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease (STD) if you catch one. It only takes one unprotected sexual encounter to get pregnant or to contract an STD, such as HIV, the virus that causes the incurable disease called AIDS.

**Legal Dangers**

Getting involved with ecstasy can get you into trouble with the law. Driving under the influence (DUI) and possessing or selling an illegal drug can take you straight to jail. If you are a minor and are caught with ecstasy, you will likely be sent to a juvenile detention center and may be sentenced to a one-year probation. If you are over eighteen years old, you may be sent to prison for up to five years.

Ecstasy is an expensive drug. Most teens cannot afford to use it regularly. Some teens have resorted to stealing from family and friends or robbing strangers to get money to buy ecstasy. Frequent users sometimes buy ecstasy in quantities of ten hits or more. They then resell the ecstasy at a higher price to cover the costs of their own doses. Whether you buy ten hits to share with your friends or to sell to strangers, you are considered a drug dealer in the eyes of the law and will be prosecuted accordingly. In 2002, a young man in Boston sold the drug to a girl at a party. As a direct result of ingesting the drug, the girl suffered seizures and later died. In May 2006, the dealer was sentenced to over two years in prison in the state’s first successful prosecution for a death linked to an illicit party drug.

Addiction

When a drug user feels an intense desire to use a drug that is known to be harmful and continues to give into the craving, they may become addicted. If the user satisfies this craving frequently, they can quickly build up a tolerance to the drug, needing more each time to achieve the same effect. This occurs because the body becomes less responsive to the effects of a drug after repeated use. A user may feel the need to use a drug even if it no longer produces any sense of pleasure. An addict sometimes suffers painful physical and psychological symptoms, or withdrawal symptoms, that occur when they stop taking the drug.

The levels of addiction differ from drug to drug. Some drugs, like heroin and alcohol, are physically addictive. This means that an addict’s body needs the drug on a regular basis; otherwise they will suffer withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea or stomach cramps. Other drugs, like ecstasy, can be psychologically and physiologically addictive. This means that users feel the need to use a drug to feel good, but they won’t necessarily suffer physical withdrawal symptoms without it. They may, however, suffer psychological withdrawal symptoms, such as severe depression and anxiety. Psychological dependence on a drug may be subtler than physical addiction, but it isn’t any less serious.

Generally, a person’s first experience with ecstasy is the strongest. Continued use over a long period of time brings diminishing returns, or fewer positive and more negative effects. Tolerance develops to ecstasy’s euphoric effects, and the drug begins to feel more like a “speed rush.” Because the user doesn’t feel the same high over time, ecstasy is less likely to be abused for very long periods than most other “hard” drugs. Tolerance for one drug leads to a high risk of cross addiction, that the person switches to other, harder drugs, such as speed or cocaine, in order to achieve a high and escape the depression.

**How Do You Become Addicted?**

The road to drug addiction usually starts with experimental use, when teens first try drugs. Most start experimenting with alcohol, cigarettes, or marijuana. If they like the experience, they may eventually move on to harder drugs to get a more intense high. Repeated use of a habit-forming drug can easily develop into addiction.

Some users get trapped in a cycle of drug dependency by becoming part of a social scene that involves drugs. For example, teens who go to raves often experiment with ecstasy because drugs are part of the scene. Sometimes, dealers give free ecstasy to first-time users to hook them on the drug. Some teens feel great the first time they use ecstasy, so they try it again. Many find that their high isn’t quite the same the second time, so they try ecstasy over and over again in an attempt to recapture their first experience with the drug.

Binge users take from three to ten hits of ecstasy at a time. Often, they boost their dosage by taking more hits throughout the trip to lengthen their high. However, taking multiple or repeated doses of ecstasy usually increases the stimulant effect, not the euphoria. By not allowing the body to go through its normal mood cycles, the user will eventually crash and feel so depressed that they will want to do more of the drug.

Depression is one of the side effects of ecstasy use, and users often depend on ecstasy to bring them out of their depression. But many users find that the more they use ecstasy the more they become depressed when they are not high. Although they feel miserable much of the time, they can’t bring themselves to stop using ecstasy because it brings temporary relief to their depression. They become caught in a no-win situation.

**How Addiction Can Affect Your Life**

Drug addiction dominates your life. It takes your attention away from important social activities, including school, work, and spending time with family and friends. If you are addicted to a drug, you will continue to use it even if you hurt yourself or those around you. Repeated use of ecstasy can wreak havoc on your health, social life, mental ability, and sense of well-being.

**Why Teens Use Drugs**

Being a teen means changing, trying new things, and deciding what you like to do. This is the time that you begin to develop your identity. You want to act like an adult and make your own decisions. Some teens experiment with drugs during this time of change to feel independent and explore new feelings. Most teens who try drugs for the first time are curious. They want to know what will happen, how they will feel, or what they will see. Curiosity is a natural feeling. It is very dangerous, though, to use a drug you don’t know anything about, just because you are curious.

Some teens use drugs to cope with the pressures of adolescence. For example, it is common in school to want to fit in and do what everyone else is doing. Others around you may be experimenting with drugs. This may seem like an easy way to look cool or feel like part of the “in” crowd. As a teenager, you may feel very insecure, especially about the way you look because your body is changing so much. You may take drugs to forget your anxieties and to feel more confident.

Drugs are often used as a way to cope with, or block out, problems. Some teens have trouble at home or at school and feel like they have no one to turn to for help. They may take drugs to feel better. After the high wears off, though, they often feel worse than they did before. Taking drugs doesn’t make your problems disappear; it only creates more problems.

Some teens think that drug use is acceptable because they see their parents or siblings abusing drugs. Their attitudes toward drugs may also be influenced by the media—magazines, television, and movies—which sometimes glamorize drugs. Seeing a favorite actor using drugs in a movie may lead you to think that drugs are okay.

Teens turn to drugs like ecstasy for many different reasons: to feel happy, to feel more secure in social settings, or to forget their problems. Yet ecstasy and other drugs only offer a temporary and artificial sense of control, confidence, and happiness. Lasting happiness can’t come from a drug.

**A Self-test for Teens**

How are drugs affecting your life? If you think you or a friend may have a drug problem, take the following self-test for teens from the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence.

* Do you use drugs to build self-confidence?
* Do you ever drink or get high immediately after you have a problem at home or at school?
* Have you ever missed school due to drugs?
* Does it bother you if someone says that you use too much alcohol or other drugs?
* Have you started hanging out with a heavy-drinking or drug-using crowd?
* Are drugs affecting your reputation?
* Do you borrow money or “do without” other things to buy drugs?
* Do you feel guilty after using drugs?
* Do you feel a sense of power when you use drugs?
* Do you use drugs until your supply is gone?
* Have you lost friends since you started using drugs?
* Do you feel more at ease in social situations when using drugs?
* Have you ever been arrested or hospitalized due to use of alcohol or illegal drugs?
* Has anyone in your family had drinking or other drug problems?
* Do you ever wake up and wonder what happened the night before?

If you answered yes to several of these questions, you may have a drug problem and will have to seek help.

Getting Help: It’s Not Too Late

If you have a drug addiction, you need to get professional help. You are only hurting yourself in the long run if you don’t. Admitting that you have a problem is a major step toward becoming well. Talk to someone you trust such as your parents, a family member, a family friend or even your teacher. There are also other people and places that can help you out.

**Help Is a Phone Call Away**

If you think that you have a drug problem, one of the easiest ways to get help is to call a drug hotline set up by organizations for people who are ready to kick their drug habit. When you call, you’ll speak with a trained counselor. You may want to start out by asking the counselor a few general questions, such as, “How do I know if I have a drug problem?” until you feel comfortable talking to this person. The counselor is trained to listen to you, answer your questions, and offer you advice on how to take care of your problem. You don’t even have to tell the counselor your name. This person will not get you in trouble with your parents. The counselor will never judge you, nor will they report you to the authorities.

**See a Drug Counselor**

You would probably benefit from some face-to-face counseling as well. If you cannot talk to your parents, you can talk to other people such as an older friend or relative, your favorite teacher, or your school counselor. They can help you get in touch with a local drug treatment clinic where you can talk to a counselor either for free or at a low cost.

When you enter a clinic, you will meet with a counselor one-on-one. It is important to talk to your counselor about your problems because they are there to listen and to help you. Your counselor may ask you questions about why you think you need drugs and what benefit you think they have on your life. They may explain how you went from just experimenting with drugs to being addicted to them. This is all part of the drug education you will receive.

**Support Groups: People Who Have Been There Before**

You will be encouraged to join a support group in which you share your drug experiences with other drug users like yourself. You may feel nervous and shy at first about sharing your story openly with strangers. But once you accept your mistakes and commit yourself to getting your life straightened out, you are on the road to recovery. You are not alone. Others are going through the very same thing. You have the support you need to turn your life around.

**When You Need Additional Help**

If your drug problem is seriously out of control, you may need inpatient treatment. Inpatient treatment means that you live at the clinic or hospital for full-time help. This is never easy, but your recovery is well worth the struggle ahead.

**It’s All Up to You**

You don’t have to buy into the myth that you have to hit rock-bottom before you need help. You may realize that you do not need drugs to feel good about yourself and have a good time. In fact, drugs end up doing the opposite. They prevent you from paying attention in school and learning all you need to know to get ahead in the world. Spending time in pursuit of your dreams is a much better way to achieve a personal high than doing drugs. The choice is yours.

Ten Great Questions to Ask When You Are Asking for Help

1. How do I know if I have a drug problem?
2. How does drug treatment work?
3. Is drug treatment effective?
4. How will I feel when I stop taking drugs?
5. How long will it take me to quit drugs?
6. How will it change me?
7. What will happen to me if I use drugs again?
8. How to I tell my parents and friends I am getting treatment for drug use?
9. Some of my friends use, too; how can I help them get help?
10. Will my recovery take place at home, or will I have to go away?

Resources

Bellwood Health Services Inc.   
 (416) 495-0926   
<https://www.edgewoodhealthnetwork.com/locations/bellwood/>  
 Toronto-based Bellwood Health Services provides treatment for people with alcohol and drug addictions, eating disorders and a variety of compulsive or problematic behaviors. It is part of the Edgewood Health Network (EHN), a network of recovery centers offering mental health treatment throughout Canada. EHN covers a wide range of needs, from outpatient therapy to short-term detox stays and multi-month treatment for mental health and substance use disorders.

Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse   
 (613) 235-4048   
[www.ccsa.ca](https://www.ccsa.ca/)  
 The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse provides national leadership and evidence-informed analysis and advice to mobilize collaborative efforts to reduce alcohol- and other drug-related harms. Its priorities include reducing alcohol-related harms, preventing the problematic use of pharmaceuticals, and increasing awareness and understanding of problematic substances use.

Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP)   
 (301) 443-8956   
<https://www.samhsa.gov/about-us/who-we-are/offices-centers/csap>  
 CSAP works with states and communities to develop comprehensive prevention systems that create healthy communities in which people enjoy a quality life. This includes supportive work and school environments, drug- and crime-free neighborhoods, and positive connections with friends and family. The national, toll-free twenty-four-hour English and Spanish hotline offers a referral service for locating treatment programs.

Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT)   
 (800) 662-4357   
<https://www.samhsa.gov/about-us/who-we-are/offices-centers/csat>  
 CSAT is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its goal is to provide access to clinically sound, cost-effective drug and alcohol addiction treatment for individuals and families that need it. The national, toll-free twenty-four-hour English and Spanish hotline offers a referral service for locating treatment programs.

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)   
 (416) 535-8501   
<http://www.camh.net>  
 The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health is Canada’s leading addiction and mental health teaching hospital and one of the world’s leading research centers in its field. The organization conducts groundbreaking research, provides expert training to health care professionals and scientists, develops innovative health promotion and prevention strategies, and advocates on public policy issues at all levels of government.

Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)   
 (202) 307-1000   
<https://www.dea.gov/>  
 The DEA is the U.S. Department of Justice organization charged with enforcing drug laws and developing anti-drug programs all across the United States. In hundreds of offices across the country, the DEA includes Special Agents, Diversion Investigators, Forensic Scientists, Intelligence Research Specialists and highly trained support staff.

Kids Help Phone   
 (416) 586-5437   
<https://kidshelpphone.ca/>  
 Kids Help Phone is Canada’s only toll-free, national, bilingual, phone and web counselling, referral and information service for children and youth. Kids Help Phone offers mental health tips and information, crisis support, professional counselling, research data on mental health, and a support service directory, among other services.

Nar-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc.   
 (800) 477-6291   
<https://www.nar-anon.org/>  
 The Nar-Anon Family Groups is primarily for those who know or have known a feeling of desperation concerning the addiction problem of someone very near to you. We have traveled that unhappy road too, and found the answer with serenity and peace of mind. Narateen is part of the Nar-Anon program for teens affected by someone else’s addiction.

Narcotics Anonymous   
 (818) 773-9999   
<https://www.na.org/>  
 Narcotics Anonymous is a nonprofit, unaffiliated organization that evolved out of the Alcoholics Anonymous program. Its programs serve people for whom drugs have become a major problem. It is not connected with any political, religious, or law enforcement groups, and is under no surveillance at any time.

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)  
 (301) 443-1124  
[teens.drugabuse.gov](http://teens.drugabuse.gov/)  
 As part of the U.S. National Institutes of Health, the National Institute on Drug Abuse is one of the leading organizations supporting research on drug abuse and addiction. Its mission is to advance science on the causes and consequences of drug use and addiction and to apply that knowledge to improve individual and public health. The NIDA for Teens site educates teens on drug abuse. Instead of preaching about the dangers of drug use, the site delivers science-based facts about how drugs affect the brain and body so that kids will be armed with better information to make healthy decisions.

Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP)   
 (800) 666-3332   
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/>  
 The Office of National Drug Control Policy is charged with establishing policies, priorities, and objectives for the drug control program of the United States. As part of the White House’s executive functions, the mission of ONDCP is to reduce substance use disorder and its consequences by coordinating the nation’s drug control policy through the development and oversight of the National Drug Control Strategy and Budget.

Recovered   
<https://recovered.org>  
 Formerly the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Recovered provides education, help, and hope to addicts as well as information about prevention, intervention, and treatment to their friends and families. The free SAMHSA chat line offers twenty-four-hour help to young alcoholics and addicts seeking information and treatment referrals. The Intervention Network provides education and assistance to friends and families of addicts.

Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD)   
 (877) 723-3462   
<https://www.sadd.org/>  
 Students Against Destructive Decisions is a peer leadership organization dedicated to preventing destructive decisions, particularly underage drinking, other drug use, impaired driving, teen violence, and teen depression and suicide. It empowers students and adult allies to engage in positive change through leadership and smart decision-making.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)   
 (877) 726-4727   
[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov/)  
 The mission of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America’s communities. SAMHSA is an agency of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. It was established by Congress in 1992 to make substance use and mental disorder information, services, and research more accessible.

For Further Reading

If you want more information on the topic, you can use the resources listed below. Works of fiction are indicated by the symbol .

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Glossary

**addiction** A dependence, whether physical, psychological, or both, upon a certain substance or activity, such as a drug or gambling.

**amphetamine** A synthetic stimulant drug that speeds up the activities of the body.

**dehydration** A condition in which the body does not have enough fluids.

**depression** A persistent and long-lasting state of mind that includes feeling down, hopeless, tired, and unmotivated.

**drug** Use of a drug in a manner or for a purpose other than that for which it is prescribed.

**ecstasy** A state of sudden and intense emotion; also the name of a drug that produces strong joyous feelings.

**euphoria** An emotional state characterized by elevated feelings of happiness or well-being.

**hallucination** A sensory experience in which a person sees or hears things without external stimuli, often the result of drug use or neurological disorder.

**hallucinogen** A chemical substance that causes hallucinations.

**hyperventilate** To breathe abnormally, rapidly, and deeply.

**paranoia** A psychological condition in which a person irrationally feels persecuted or suspects others of having hostile intentions.

**psychoactive** Relating to drugs that have a significant effect on a person’s mood or behavior.

**rave** Large dance party with techno music and light and video shows.

**serotonin** A chemical in the brain that is thought to regulate mood, sleep, hunger, and sexual function.

**synthetic** Produced artificially.

**techno** A style of dance music consisting of fast rhythms and sampled synthesizer music.

**tolerance** Ability to endure or accept something; in medicine, the body’s ability to get used to, or become less responsive to, a drug, requiring larger doses to get the same effect.

**withdrawal** Removal, such as money removed from an account or the process of stopping a physical or mental addiction.

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