

Quick Facts: Substance Use Disorder in Children and Teens with ADHD

Teenagers sometimes experiment with substances that can put them at risk. Children and teens with ADHD are more likely than those without ADHD to try alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and other illegal substances. When substance use is severe or frequent, it can become a substance use disorder. Substance use disorder happens when a person repeatedly uses a substance despite the negative effects on their body, school or work, personal life, or family. This quick fact will help you:

1. Recognize symptoms of substance use disorder in children and teens with ADHD.
2. Know what to do if you think your child may have a substance use disorder.
3. Learn how your doctor will diagnose and treat co-occurring substance use disorder and ADHD.



How common is substance use disorder in children and teens with ADHD?

Children and teens with ADHD are two or three times more likely to try cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, and other substances than children without ADHD. They are more likely to take risks. Stress at school or home may cause them to use substances to cope, which raises their risk of developing a substance use disorder.

Children and teens who use substances like tobacco, marijuana, or alcohol may temporarily feel like they can better cope with their ADHD symptoms. They may go from experimenting to abusing substances more quickly than their peers. Research studies suggest that both ADHD and substance use disorder may run in families.

What are the signs and symptoms?

- Smelling like alcohol or smoke
- Bloodshot eyes
- Flushed face
- Sudden mood changes
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Secretive or deceitful behavior
- Less motivation to do things they used to do
- Loss of interest in going to school and doing well
- Hanging out with new friends

Diagnosis

If you suspect that your child or teen has a substance use disorder, contact their doctor right away, and if possible, ask for a referral for a professional who specializes in treating ADHD and substance use disorder.

When diagnosing ADHD, the doctor may use interviews with parents, teacher behavior ratings, observations, and/or psychological tests. *(Continued on page 2)*



(Diagnosis, continued) When diagnosing substance use disorder, the doctor may include a mental health evaluation. They may ask that older teens complete a self-rating scale.

However, some teens may find it challenging to describe symptoms or remember when their symptoms first began. In this case, the doctor may instead rely on parent interviews.

Treatment

A child or teen is less likely to develop substance use disorder if they get the right treatment for their ADHD, including stimulant medication. Using stimulant medication without following a doctor's order can cause substance use disorder, but when stimulants are carefully prescribed and properly used to treat ADHD, they don't increase risk for a substance use disorder.

The recommended treatment for coexisting substance use disorder and ADHD requires a combined approach that may include medication such as extended-release or transdermal stimulants that are less likely to be abused, family therapy, and cognitive behavioral therapy.

Depending on the severity of the substance use disorder, your child may need to be referred to an in-patient treatment program to help them withdraw safely. When your child is receiving such treatment, communicate regularly with their care team. Make sure that you and your child understand the treatment plan and know what to do if your child suffers a setback. Keep in mind that recovery from substance use disorder can be a long process that requires patience.

Strategies for prevention of substance use disorder

Use these strategies if you think your child with ADHD may be at risk for using substances.

- Have conversations with your child at an early age about substance use and abuse risks. Let them know that they need to be even more careful with exposure to substances than their peers.
- Keep your face, voice, and body calm. Show your child how you cope with stress other than by using substances. Children learn by watching the behaviors of those around them.
- Make sure your child knows your family rules about illegal substances and what the consequences will be if those rules are broken.
- Let your child know that having ADHD can make it harder to talk with friends and deal with peer pressure.
- Help your child understand what to expect and what to do if a friend asks them to take drugs or alcohol.
- Roleplay possible things your child can do if they are ever in a situation where alcohol, tobacco, or other substances are available.
- Talk about what they could say if a peer is pressuring them to try illegal substances. Practicing possible responses may protect your child from being caught off guard and help them resist peer pressure.
- If your child takes stimulant medication as part of their treatment plan, talk with them about the dangers of misusing their medication and about saying no to requests to share or sell their medication.