

# Signs and Symptoms of Drug Use

Recognising current drug use is a major issue for many professionals who work with young people. There is also the issue of identifying those young people who may be at increased risk of using drugs. Below are specific physical and behavioural signs that may be associated with drug use. Some of these, however, can indicate the onset of adolescence.

## Physical Signs

These can differ depending on the type of drug taken, for example a stimulant or hallucinogen. Below are some of the physical signs related to drugs used illicitly in Northern Ireland.

## Solvents

Solvents include glues, butane gas refills, aerosols, typewriting correcting fluids and thinners.

Signs to look out for include:

- usual signs of intoxication – unco-ordinated movement or slurred speech;
- possible odour on clothes and breath;
- redness around the mouth and nose, if using glue;
- a cough; and
- possible stains on clothing, depending on type of solvent used.

## Cannabis

Cannabis can have the effect of a depressant or mild hallucinogen, depending on the amount taken and situational factors. The effects of taking cannabis include:

- a tendency to laugh easily;
- becoming talkative;
- relaxed behaviour;
- reddening of the eyes; and
- hunger.

If the drug is smoked, it produces a distinctive sweet smell.

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## Ecstasy

Ecstasy is sometimes referred to as a hallucinogenic stimulant. Its effects will therefore include those listed for stimulants. It can also cause:

- increased temperature;
- excessive sweating;
- a very dry mouth and throat;
- jerky, unco-ordinated movements;
- clenched jaws;
- occasional nausea, when first used; and
- fatigue after use, but also possibly some anxiety, depression and muscle pain.

## Stimulants (amphetamines (speed), butyl nitrite (poppers) or cocaine)

The effects can result in:

- increased pulse rate;
- increased blood pressure;
- agitation;
- talkativeness or lack of coherent speech;
- dilated pupils;
- loss of appetite;
- damage to nasal passages;
- increased tendency to go to the toilet;
- mouth ulcers; and
- fatigue after use.

## Hallucinogens (LSD, magic mushrooms)

Effects can vary depending on nature of the experience. These include:

- relaxed behaviour;
- agitated behaviour;
- dilation of pupils; and
- unco-ordinated movements.

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## Heroin

Heroin acts as a depressant. The effects of taking heroin include:

- decrease in breathing and heart rate;
- suppression of cough reflex;
- increase in size of certain blood vessels;
- itchy skin;
- runny nose;
- decreasing body temperature; and
- sweating.

## Behavioural Signs

Drug use can often cause behavioural changes. These changes can be difficult to recognise. Some prior knowledge of the person is required to make an accurate evaluation of behaviour. The changes can be obvious or very subtle and may be due to some other reason, unconnected with drug use.

Signs can include:

- efforts to hide drug use through lying, evasiveness and secretive behaviour;
- unsatisfactory reasons for unexpected absences or broken promises;
- changes in friendships;
- changes in priorities, including less concern with school work, less care of personal appearance, non-attendance at extra-curricular activities;
- efforts to get money for drug use, ranging from saving dinner or allowance money, borrowing from friends or relatives or selling own possessions to stealing from friends or home or involvement in petty crime; and
- secretive telephone calls.

Other possible signs include:

- being very knowledgeable about drugs and the local drug scene;
- a defensive attitude towards drugs and drug taking;
- unusual outbreaks of temper;
- absence from or poor performance at school or work experience on days following nights out in nightclubs or bars; and
- a pattern of absences on a certain day.

These signs may often only become apparent in pupils who are using drugs on a regular basis. Such signs can be difficult to see in the experimental or casual drug user.