



# All about alcohol and drugs

# What are drugs?



This booklet contains information on alcohol ([Section 1](#)), the different types of drugs ([Section 2](#)), and the associated legal implications ([Section 3](#)).

For ease, the different drugs are listed in alphabetical order. At the back of the booklet there is a page that lists [additional sources of information](#) for more detail.

For some people it can be **difficult to control or stop drug use**. Some people may use drugs to **cope with other problems** like:

Low self-esteem

Mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression

Social isolation

## Understanding drugs and drug use can help you to:

1. Feel better informed
2. Further understand your loved one
3. Regain some feeling of control

## POLYDRUG USE

When using **substances in combination**, including drugs and alcohol, risks can be increased.

People might use **more than one type of drug to balance out the effects, or to enhance** the feeling of both drugs. Different substances **react in different ways**, which can sometimes be **dangerous**.

The most common type of poly-drug use involves [alcohol](#) and other substances.

Alcohol is a depressant, and when taken with other depressant drugs (e.g. [opiates](#)), the **effect is multiplied**, risking a person passing out, choking on

# Section 1: Alcohol

## ALCOHOL

Alcohol is an **addictive and psychoactive** substance.

Psychoactive means that it **affects the mind** - it slows down parts of the brain that control:



**Inhibition**



**Memory**



**Sleep**

Alcohol can make people:

- Become **aggressive** or **emotional**
- **Act recklessly**, which can lead to accidents and injury
- Feel woozy or **pass out**

If someone is **alcohol dependent**, they often **cannot control their use of alcohol**, despite negative consequences to their lives, and will suffer withdrawal effects if they do not drink.

People who are **strongly dependent** should **seek professional help** if they try and stop: **withdrawal** from severe dependence can be **fatal**.

Long-term heavy alcohol use **increases the risk of cancer** as well as **damage to the heart, brain, liver, pancreas**, and other organs.

# Section 2: Drugs

## CANNABIS

Cannabis is the **most commonly used drug** in the UK.

The main active chemical is **THC**, which causes people to:

- Feel 'chilled out', happy, and relaxed
- Hallucinate, hearing, or feeling things different to normal

Cannabis can have **harmful effects** and lead to:

Anxiety or  
paranoia

Difficulty  
concentrating and  
remembering things

Serious, long-term  
mental health  
conditions

Cannabis can be smoked, eaten, drunk, or ingested using a vaporizer (where the chemicals evaporate and can be inhaled).

Although, it is unlikely that someone will overdose on cannabis when using in the common way, it can **increase the chance of accidents** and cause:



**Dizziness**



**Sickness**



**Fainting**

Cannabis can be **addictive**, with users gradually needing more to feel good, and feeling bad if they don't use it, making it difficult to stop.

## CLUB DRUGS

Club drugs tend to be used in **bars** and **clubs** or at **concerts** and **parties**.

Examples include drugs like ketamine, GBL, and MDMA.

Club drugs are relatively new to the scene, and only now are we starting to discover the **associated long-term health problems** like bladder issues with ketamine, coma linked to GBL, and behavioural issues associated with MDMA.

These drugs are sometimes used in "chemsex" parties, particularly among gay men, where drug use is combined with sexual activity.

## COCAINE

Cocaine is a powerful stimulant with short-lived effects. It is most commonly smoked and makes people feel **confident** and **alert**.

While all types of cocaine are addictive, **crack cocaine** tends to have **stronger effects** and be **more addictive than powder cocaine**.

Using cocaine can impact a person in a variety of ways including:



**Making their heart  
beat faster**



**Raising their  
body temperature**



**Making them anxious  
or paranoid**

**Withdrawal symptoms** are difficult and can include hunger, irritability, tiredness, anxiety, and depression.

**Long-term impacts** can include heart attacks, chest pain, difficulty breathing, strokes, and seizures.

## COCAINE (CONTINUED)

Mixing cocaine with other substances can increase the risk of overdose as well as impact the person's health:

### Cocaine + [Alcohol](#)

Mix in the body to produce a toxic chemical (cocaethylene) which affects the heart



### Central Nervous System

(CNS) includes the brain and the spinal cord

### Cocaine + [Heroin](#)

Each drug puts pressure on the **CNS** and the heart which can lead to lung failure

## HEROIN

Heroin comes from morphine, which is extracted from the opium poppy.

Like most opiates, heroin is an effective painkiller, and gives the user a feeling of warmth and wellbeing.

Bigger doses can make you sleepy and relaxed. It is **highly addictive** and people can quickly become dependent.

Withdrawal is **extremely unpleasant**, making it more difficult to stop. Symptoms can include:



**Muscle pain**



**Insomnia**



**Bone pain**

Heroin is most often injected. Injecting and **sharing injecting equipment** can be **very risky**, as it can spread viruses like HIV or Hepatitis C.

Both natural opioids like heroin and [synthetic opioids](#) can cause **dependence and addiction**, and overdosing on either may be fatal.

Possible overdose effects include **cold, clammy skin, extreme constriction of the pupils, and lung failure** that can be fatal.

## NOVEL PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES

Over the past several years, there has been a rise in the use of **novel psychoactive substances (NPS)**, often **misleadingly called 'legal highs'**.

They are a new group of drugs that **mimic the effects** of drugs like [cocaine](#), and [cannabis](#). They are designed to **get around laws that specifically ban** these drugs.

Many NPS have **not been tested** so there is little evidence about the effects and **safety** of these drugs **especially in combination with other drugs**.

Packaging is usually **eye-catching** with bright colours, and they are sold in a variety of forms e.g. powders, pills, and capsules.

## PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

Most people use prescription drugs for the purpose they are intended, but some people, can become dependent.

Many prescription drugs are **vulnerable to misuse**:

[Opiates](#), often prescribed to treat pain

CNS depressants e.g. benzodiazepines, for anxiety

Stimulants e.g. to treat ADHD

Prescription drugs can cause **sedation, breathing problems, issues with coordination, and nausea**.

They can cause **dependence** if taken over a long period of time, and **damage to the liver, kidneys and digestive system**.

Withdrawal symptoms might include **anxiety, depression, insomnia or seizures**.

## STEROIDS/IEDS

Steroids/Image enhancing drugs (IEDs) **mimic natural hormones in the body** that regulate and control how the body works.



**Anabolic steroids** are the most likely to be misused as they can help build **muscles**, because they are similar to the male hormone testosterone.

They can make some people feel **aggressive, paranoid, irritable** or **violent**, and cause dramatic mood swings.

Taking steroids/IEDs can cause **high blood pressure and liver damage**.

## SYNTHETIC OPIOIDS

Synthetic opioids come from **man-made chemicals**.

Side effects of synthetic opioids include:



**Drowsiness**



**Confusion**



**Feeling sick**

Both natural opioids ([heroin](#)) and synthetic opioids can cause **dependence and addiction**, and overdosing on either may be fatal.

Possible overdose effects include **cold, clammy skin, extreme constriction of the pupils, and breathing failure that can be fatal**.



# Section 3: The legal implications of drug misuse

The **Misuse of Drugs Act of 1971** defines a number of illegal activities related to controlled drugs.

Controlled drugs are drugs that the government have decided are especially addictive and harmful and therefore need high levels of regulation such as cannabis and opiates ([click here for the full list](#)).

Examples of offences related to controlled drugs are listed below (as detailed by [Release](#)):

1

## Possession of controlled drugs

It is unlawful to have a controlled drug in your possession unless you have authorisation in the form of a licence - for example, a prescription.

Three elements constitute the offence of possession:

- **The substance is in the possession or under control of the individual**, which can mean the substance is at the property of someone who is not present but has control over that property
- **The individual knows of the existence of the substance**
- **The substance is a controlled drug**

2

## Possession with the intent to supply

It is an offence for a person to have a controlled drug in their possession, **whether lawfully or not**, with the intent to supply it to another person who has no legal right to possess it.

Supply is the simple act of **passing a controlled drug from one person to another person**. It does not matter if it was for profit or not. The issue of financial gain is only relevant for the purposes of sentencing.



The two main production offences are:

- Production of a controlled drug
- Being involved in the production of a controlled drug

Production is defined as '**manufacturing, cultivating, or production by any other method**'.

For example, separating those parts of the [cannabis](#) plant which are not usable from those which are is considered preparation and therefore can amount to the offence of production.

### Sentences for controlled drugs

Controlled drugs fall into three different categories: Class A, Class B, and Class C, according to how harmful they are.

The sentences for drug offences are different for each class of drugs.

Class A drugs are the most harmful and so will lead to a greater sentence.

For more information on the different drug classes, [click here](#).

## THE PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES ACT

The **Psychoactive Substances Act** came into force in 2016, under the Act the following activities related to psychoactive substances are illegal:

Production

Supply

Possession with  
intent to supply

Importation

Exportation

## Useful organisations



### Adfam

- Offers information and advice for families affected by drugs and alcohol
- [www.adfam.org.uk](http://www.adfam.org.uk)

### Drug Science

- Objective information on drugs and drug harms
- [www.drugscience.org.uk](http://www.drugscience.org.uk)

### DrugWise

- Evidence-based information on drugs, alcohol, and tobacco
- <https://www.drugwise.org.uk/>

### FRANK

- Advice and information for anyone concerned about drugs
- Helpline: 0300 123 6600 (24 hours)
- [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)

### HIT

- Specialises in providing information on drugs, with a focus on drug-related harm reduction
- <https://hit.org.uk/>

### Release

- Free, confidential, and non-judgemental information and advice about drug laws
- <https://release.org.uk>

# About this resource:

The content in this booklet has been developed under advisement of specialist organisations and professionals.

This resource has been updated by **Nexus Values**, a specialist value strategy consultancy passionate about supporting the communication of value in healthcare, as part of a pro bono collaboration through **Passion Partnership**.



**We want anyone affected by someone else's drug or alcohol use to have the chance to benefit from healthy relationships, be part of a loving and supportive family and enjoy mental and physical wellbeing.**

**If you require further help and information please visit our website ([www.adfam.org.uk](http://www.adfam.org.uk))**