

What Is Substance Use Disorder?

Substance use means using alcohol or drugs. For some people, this use can increase over time and lead to addiction. Substance use disorder (SUD) happens when a person keeps using alcohol and/or drugs even though it causes problems in their life – such as issues at school, work, or home.

Even if a young person’s substance use does not reach the level of a disorder or addiction, it can still be harmful. It might lead to poor grades, conflicts with friends or family, or risky behavior.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

How common is substance use disorder?

Substance use disorder is one of the most common mental health disorders in teens and young adults.

For Parents and Caregivers: What should I do if I suspect my child may have substance use disorder?

Start by keeping an eye on the situation and talking openly with your child. Share your concerns with your child’s medical provider, teachers, or school counselor. Ask about local resources and support that might be helpful.

For Youth: What should I do if I think I may have a problem with substance use?

Talk to an adult you trust, such as a teacher, family member, or medical provider. You don’t have to face this alone.

What kind of help is there for substance use disorder?

Common ways treat substance use problems include:

- **Behavior therapy:** Talking with a therapist can help to manage stress and emotions in a healthier way, and help you understand what leads to substance use. Some people might benefit from inpatient programs - when they stay at a treatment center for a while to get help.
- **Medication:** Sometimes medical providers use medication to reduce cravings, ease withdrawal symptoms, or treat related issues like anxiety, depression, or other mental health concerns.
- **Recovery services:** The New York State Office of Addiction Services and Supports has free drop-in centers that provide peer support, skill building, and community activities.

What other conditions are common in people with substance use disorder?

People with substance use disorder might also have depression, anxiety, or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Sometimes a person starts using drugs or alcohol as a way of self-medicating because of an underlying mental health condition. Be open with your medical provider about all symptoms so they can help with everything, not just substance use.

Talking with a Medical Provider

When talking with medical providers or specialists, you might want to:

- Bring notes! Document changes that you and others have noticed and when they started.
- Discuss whether this is typical teen behavior or becoming a problem.
- Ask if anxiety, depression, or neurodiversity (a term for all the different ways our brains work) could be related to the substance use.

What You Can Do at Home

Getting help can take time, and there may be waiting lists. In the meantime, it might help to:

- **Be honest and clear:** Have a private conversation about your concerns and the changes in behavior that you're noticing.
- **Listen without judgement:** Give your child a safe space to open up about what they're dealing with.
- **Offer reassurance:** Let your child know that you are there to help, not to shame, punish, or blame them.

Learning about substance use disorder and getting help is a journey. You're not alone.

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NYS Department of Health County Programs – CYSHCN



<https://on.ny.gov/43ho1ZK>

ACT for Youth: Substance Use



<https://bit.ly/act-sud>

About This Series

This series of handouts on health conditions was written by clinicians in Weill Cornell Medicine's Pediatric Mental Health Integration Program, partners in the ACT for Youth CYSHCN Program Center of Excellence at Cornell University.

