

Prevention of Prescription Drug Abuse and Illicit Drug Use in the U.S.

Illicit drug use and the misuse of prescription medications are widespread problems in the United States. Approximately 23 million Americans aged 12 or older, or roughly 9 percent of the population in this age group, are current illicit drug users.¹ These substances include marijuana/hashish, cocaine (including crack), heroin, hallucinogens, and inhalants — but these aren't the only drugs that can harm people's health — as the 23 million also include Americans who engage in the nonmedical use of prescription-type pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants, and sedatives.² Approximately 6 million Americans report that they currently use prescription drugs for nonmedical purposes.³

Most young people refrain from using illicit drugs, but an estimated 1 in 10 youth aged 12 to 17 is a current illicit drug user.⁴ Drug use among people of all ages is dangerous because it can lead to addiction, reduced self-control and impaired decision-making,⁵ in addition to other serious physical consequences. Some drugs can alter the brain in ways that persist after the person has stopped taking drugs, and which may even be permanent.⁶

Learn what you can do to help protect your loved ones and community.

22
percent

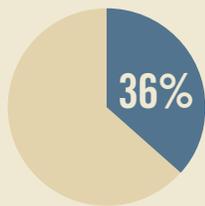
Almost one quarter (22 percent) of full-time college students aged 18 to 22 are **current illicit drug users**.⁷

Q:

What is the most **commonly used illicit drug** in the U.S.?

A:

Marijuana. Among people who are illicit drug users, **81 percent** of them **use marijuana**.⁸



Approximately 36 percent of **current illicit drug users** aged 12 or older — or 8 million people — **use drugs other than marijuana**.⁹

**EIGHT
MILLION
PEOPLE**

Of the 8 million people who use drugs other than marijuana, the majority were nonmedical users of **prescription medications, including 4.5 million users of pain relievers**.¹⁰

Using illicit drugs and misusing prescription drugs can have severe health consequences.

Side effects of illicit drugs, including depressants and stimulants, can include:^{11,12,13}

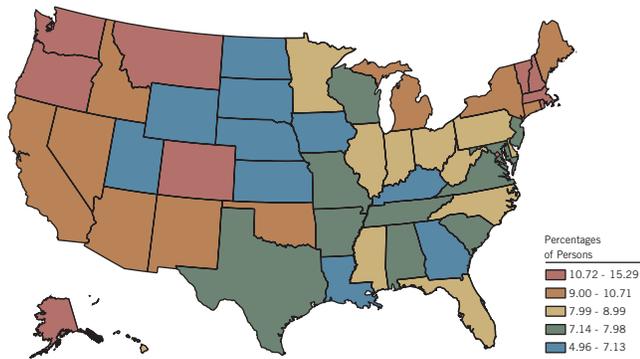
- Blurred vision;
- Hallucinations;
- Delirium;
- Dangerous levels of dehydration and overheating;
- Feelings of sadness, anxiety and depression;
- Thinking and memory difficulties;
- Slowed pulse and breathing; and
- Respiratory depression.

Using or abusing illicit drugs can result in more serious consequences, such as blood clots, liver and lung disease, heart failure, coma, and death.¹⁴

Combining prescription drugs with alcohol or other drugs can also lead to heart failure, seizures, and can be lethal.¹⁵ When taken as prescribed by a doctor or healthcare provider, prescription drugs are safe and effective. But all medicines have risks when misused or abused. It's important to follow directions on dosages and how often to take these drugs, and never take any medication that's prescribed for someone else.

Drugs can impair perception, cognition, attention, balance, coordination, reaction time, and other capabilities needed for daily activities, such as driving.¹⁶ Operating a vehicle under the influence of drugs puts the safety of drivers, passengers, pedestrians, and others on the road at risk.

Illicit Drug Use in the Past Month Among People Aged 12 or Older, by State: 2010 and 2011



Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2010 (Revised March 2012) and 2011.

A National Perspective

The map illustrates the differences in rates of drug use across the United States. No matter where your state falls along the spectrum, it's important to prevent the negative impact drugs can have on health and communities — see below for tips on how to take action.

DID YOU KNOW?

The economic cost of drug abuse in the United States is an estimated **\$193 billion**.¹⁷

What Communities Can Do

Parents

Get involved in your child's day-to-day activities and discuss the risks of using illicit and prescription drugs. By being involved early and consistently, you can help prevent problems before they occur.¹⁸ Parents should also securely store prescription drugs and dispose of unused supplies.

Educators

Improve the learning environment by addressing students' aggressive behaviors and poor concentration, which are risks associated with the eventual onset of drug abuse and related problems.¹⁹

Community Organizations and Leaders

- Implement effective prevention programs — SAMHSA's **National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices** provides an online registry of more than 250 proven prevention interventions (<http://nrepp.samhsa.gov>).
- In partnership with schools or others in your community, use **SAMHSA's Risk and Protective Factors** handout (http://bblocks.samhsa.gov/media/blocks/Educators/Risk_Protection_Educator_Tool.pdf) to identify and consider factors that have the most impact for young

people in your community. An important goal of prevention is to change the balance between risk and protective factors, so that protective factors outweigh risk factors. Risk factors can increase a person's chances for drug abuse, while protective factors can reduce the risk. Assess risk and protective factors associated with drug problems in your community to target prevention services.²⁰

- Learn more about national efforts in the **National Prevention Strategy**, available at <http://www.healthcare.gov/prevention/nphpphc/strategy/report.pdf>.

Everyone

Many signs may indicate that someone is abusing prescription drugs or using illicit drugs, and could also point to other problems. Signs to look for include:²¹

- Missing prescription drugs (especially narcotics and mood stabilizers), or evidence of drug paraphernalia or inhalant products;
- Changes in friends, the use of secretive language, increased secrecy about possessions or activities, or negative changes in school or job performance;
- Increased use of sprays, perfumes, or mouthwash to mask smoke or chemical odors; and
- An increase in borrowing money.

Workplaces²²

Drug-free workplace programs can help employers create cost-effective, safe, and healthy workplaces. Studies have indicated that successful drug-free workplace programs generally have at least five key components:²³

- A written policy;
- Employee education;
- Supervisor training;
- An employee assistance program (EAP); and
- Drug testing.

Before considering these five components, employers should examine the needs of their organizations and take steps to ensure that the programs they design will work well in their workplaces. Download SAMHSA's **Drug-Free Workplace Kit** from <http://www.drugfreeworkplace.gov/pdf/workplace-kit.pdf> for more information about implementing a drug-free workplace program.

Helpful Resources

- **SAMHSA's Treatment Locator**, available at <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>, is a searchable directory of drug and alcohol treatment programs. The Treatment Locator shows the location of facilities around the country that treat drug abuse and alcohol problems.
- The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy's (ONDCP's) National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign provides materials directed toward teens through its **"Above the Influence"** campaign. More information is available at <http://www.abovetheinfluence.com>.
- The **"NIDA for Teens"** website from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), available at <http://teens.drugabuse.gov>, offers facts for teens about prescription drug abuse and illicit drug use. **NIDA InfoFacts**, available at <http://www.drugabuse.gov/infofacts/infofactsindex.html>, also provides updated information on the health effects of specific drugs, including club drugs and herbal mixtures.
- SAMHSA's Road to Recovery webcast, **"Ignoring Instructions: The Importance of Using Prescription and Over-the-Counter Medications Properly,"** gives an overview of prescription drug abuse and discusses people who are at risk, available at <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>.

If you are concerned that you or someone you know may be abusing or addicted to prescription or illicit drugs, help is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 365 days a year through SAMHSA's National Helpline, 1-800-662-HELP (4357) or 1-800-487-4889 (TDD). The Helpline provides free and confidential information and treatment referrals in English and Spanish.

Sources

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