

Chapter 28

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Alcohol and Other Drugs



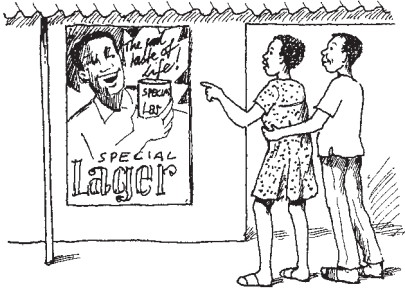
Many kinds of *drugs* are used in everyday life. In some places, drugs or brewed drinks have a sacred role in traditions. In other places, alcoholic drinks like wine or beer are commonly served with meals. Drugs and alcohol are often part of festive or social events. And some drugs are used as medicines. People usually use alcohol and other drugs because they like the way they make them feel.

Many people use alcohol and drugs throughout their lives without problems. But when someone uses them too much or too often, it can have negative effects on their health and well-being and that of their community.

In this chapter we talk about the problems drugs can cause for anyone, their specific effects on women and people who can become pregnant, and ways to stop using drugs, especially alcohol and tobacco, the most commonly misused drugs in many communities.

► Many people do not realize that alcohol and tobacco are drugs and can be harmful.

Use and Misuse of Alcohol and Drugs



Some advertisements, music, and movies encourage young people to drink and use drugs.

► If using a drug is changing your life, try to get help before the drug harms you, your family, or your friendships.

HOW DOES ALCOHOL OR DRUG USE START?

People start using alcohol and other drugs for many reasons. Young people often begin using them because of social pressure. Boys may face pressure to drink or use drugs to prove their manhood. Girls may feel it makes them appear more mature and likable. But using alcohol or drugs does not make someone an adult, and use can be harmful, especially at a young age.

Companies use advertisements to sell more and make more money by showing fun, successful, and attractive young people using drugs and alcohol. This encourages people to use drugs and alcohol so they can be fun, successful, and attractive too. This kind of pressure is especially harmful, because often people are not aware it is affecting them.

WHEN DOES USE BECOME MISUSE?

Alcohol and drugs are easily misused. Misuse is when people lose control over when and how much they use, can no longer control what they do while using, or develop health problems from using. People misusing alcohol or drugs often:

- feel they cannot go through the day without having a drink or using drugs.
- hide it or lie about how much they use.
- have trouble meeting their financial, family, and work responsibilities.
- have trouble controlling their behavior. They may become violent, steal to get drugs, ruin celebrations, and feel shame later about what they did.

Some drugs that are often used in harmful ways are:

- alcohol drinks such as beer, spirits, liquor, wine, brew



- stimulants, such as cocaine, amphetamines, MDMA (ecstasy), ketamine, khat



- betel, khat, tobacco leaf



- cannabis, marijuana, hashish

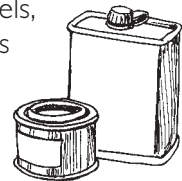


- opioids, such as heroin and opium, and pain medicines, such as morphine, oxycodone, fentanyl, or codeine



- tranquilizers (medicines for anxiety), such as Valium (diazepam) or Xanax

- glue, fuels, solvents



WHY PEOPLE MISUSE DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

Some people misuse alcohol and drugs to escape problems in their lives, like losing their home or their partner; being mistreated or abused, or the death of a family member. When people do not feel they can change their lives, alcohol or drugs can seem like a way to cope, to feel less pain, or to feel more happiness, confidence, or power.

Because these feelings do not last, people need to use more to feel that way again.

Women often have even less power than others to change their lives so may turn to alcohol or drugs to feel something other than hopeless.

Unfortunately, drugs and alcohol usually make all these problems worse, and people feel even less able to take charge of their lives. Instead of looking for ways to improve their situations, people who misuse drugs or alcohol often spend their time, money, and health trying to avoid and forget their problems.

Misuse can also run in families. Misusing alcohol or drugs is more common for people whose parents tried to escape problems this way. Children who see this at home also learn to do it, and the tendency to misuse alcohol or drugs can be passed from parents to children.



When is it an addiction?

Addiction is when a person is unable to control their alcohol or drug use, even though it is causing harm in their life. Some drugs are more addictive than others, but using alcohol or drugs often and for a long period of time can cause changes in the brain that may lead to addiction. A person addicted to alcohol or a drug:

- has physical signs if they do not use it (called *withdrawal*, see page 442)
- needs to use more and more of something to feel its effects.
- will keep using alcohol or drugs, despite the harm it causes them.
- are likely to start using again after quitting, even after years of not using.

Problems from Alcohol and Other Drugs



Using drugs and alcohol can damage your health permanently.

► People who chew tobacco are at risk for most of the same health problems as those who smoke tobacco.

COMMON HEALTH PROBLEMS

People who use a lot of alcohol or drugs often are more likely to have:

- poor *nutrition*, which causes more sickness.
- *cancer*, and problems of the heart, *liver*, stomach, skin, lungs and *urine system*.
- brain injury or *seizures*.
- illnesses from *HIV* infection develop more quickly.
- memory loss—waking up not knowing what happened.
- mental health problems, such as severe *depression* or *anxiety*, or seeing strange things or hearing voices (hallucinations), being suspicious of others, or having flashbacks (when a person suddenly remembers something from the past as if it is happening now).
- an *overdose* from using too much at one time, which can cause death.

In addition, injuries or death from accidents happen more often to people using alcohol or drugs (and often to their families), because they make a person less able to control their body or react quickly and less likely to make good decisions. A person using alcohol or drugs may also act in ways that increase their risk for *sexually transmitted infections* (including HIV), such as having unprotected sex and sharing needles to inject drugs.

Drugs that are chewed. Chewing tobacco and betel nut often harm a person's teeth and gums, and cause sores in the mouth, cancer of the mouth and throat, and other harm throughout the body. *Khat* can cause stomach problems and *constipation*.

Sniffing glues and solvents. Many poor people, especially children who live on the streets, sniff glue and solvents to forget their hunger. This is very addictive and causes problems with seeing, trouble thinking and remembering, violent behavior, loss of judgement and body control, severe weight loss, and even

Any use of drugs or alcohol is dangerous if a person:

- is driving, using a machine or dangerous tool.
- is pregnant or breastfeeding.
- is caring for small children.
- is taking medicine, especially medicines for pain, sleep, seizures, or mental health problems.
- has liver or *kidney* disease



It can be dangerous to use drugs or medicines together with alcohol.

DRUGS AND ALCOHOL HARM WOMEN, ANYONE WHO CAN BECOME PREGNANT, AND DEVELOPING BABIES

Harm to women

In addition to the problems that anyone who misuses drugs or alcohol may have, women face more risks.

Women and girls almost everywhere are constantly on guard against sexual harassment and assault. Since using and misusing alcohol or drugs affects the ability to stay alert and make good decisions, it can make women and girls more vulnerable. Sexual assault may result in unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections, as well as other physical and emotional harms caused by the violence (see chapters 18, “Violence Against Women,” and 19, “Rape and Sexual Violence”).

In most communities, women’s behavior is controlled more strictly and judged more harshly than men’s behavior. To avoid blame and punishment, women often hide their misuse of alcohol or drugs. This makes it harder to ask for help and support if they decide to quit (see page 441).

Harm to people who can become pregnant

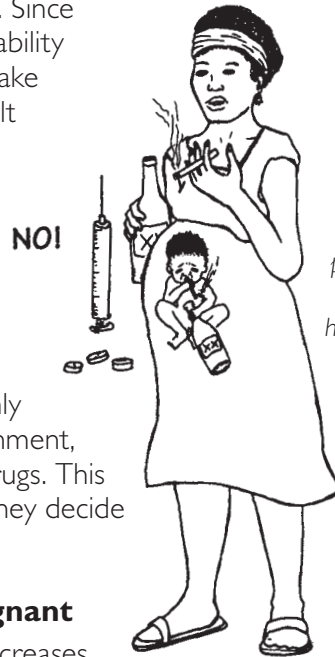
The longtime heavy use of drugs and alcohol increases the risk of liver disease for people who can become pregnant.

Harm to the developing baby in the womb

Using drugs or alcohol during pregnancy can cause children to be born with cognitive delays or disabilities such as:

- problems of the heart, bones, genitals, head, and face.
- low birth weight.
- delayed growth.
- behavior problems.

A baby can be born addicted to drugs and experience the same signs of withdrawal as an adult (see page 442).



When a pregnant person uses alcohol or drugs, it can harm the developing baby.

Problems from Tobacco

► Smoking can cause disease in those around you who do not smoke.

HEALTH PROBLEMS FROM SMOKING

People who smoke become addicted to a drug in tobacco called nicotine. Once someone starts, it is very hard to stop smoking because nicotine is a very addictive drug. Without nicotine, a person will experience withdrawal (see page 442).

Since men used to smoke more than women, smoking has mainly been seen as a men's health problem. But nowadays smoking is a growing cause of poor health among women. It is also a growing cause of health problems in poor countries. One reason for this is that smoking helps people cope with stress. Another is that tobacco companies are trying harder to sell cigarettes in these countries, as more people in rich countries stop smoking.

Smoking can cause:

- serious diseases of the lungs, including chronic bronchitis and *emphysema*.
- severe colds and coughs.
- *cancer* of the lung, mouth, throat and neck, and *bladder*.
- heart attack, *stroke*, and *high blood pressure*.

Some of these problems can cause death. In fact, half of all people who smoke will die from a health problem connected to smoking.

Children whose parents smoke have more problems with their lungs and breathing than children whose parents do not smoke.



SMOKING CAUSES EVEN MORE HEALTH PROBLEMS FOR PEOPLE WHO CAN BECOME PREGNANT

In addition to those listed above, problems include:

- difficulty getting pregnant (*infertility*).
- *miscarriage* and babies born too small or too soon.
- blood clots when using *birth control pills*.
- menstrual periods that end earlier in life (*early menopause*).
- bones that weaken and break more easily during mid-life and old age (*osteoporosis*).
- cancer of the *cervix* and *womb*.

During pregnancy, try to avoid people who are smoking. This will keep smoke from harming you or the developing baby.

If alcohol or drug use becomes a problem, making changes can help. But overcoming alcohol or drug use takes time. How difficult it will be depends on what you have been using and what kind of support you receive. Still, it is possible.

Quitting is best for your health, but not everyone wants to quit and not everyone can quit when they want to. Whether you quit completely or lessen your use, you can support your recovery by eating nutritious food, exercising regularly, and getting enough rest.

HARM REDUCTION

People who cannot or do not want to quit can reduce some dangers of their drug or alcohol use, including poisoning, overdose, and infections. To avoid alcohol poisoning and drug overdose:

- Eat something a couple of hours before using alcohol or drugs.
- Drink plenty of fluids before, during, and after using.
- Trust your instincts—do not drink or use anything that looks, tastes, or smells wrong.
- Start with small amounts and add more only to use what you need.
- Take breaks between doses.
- Do not use different kinds of drugs and alcohol at the same time.
- Have a friend with you to get help if something goes wrong.

To avoid infections:

- Keep your equipment (mouthpiece, pipe, syringe, cooker, snorting kit) clean, and do not share it with others.
- If using needles, use a new one every time, or clean the old one with bleach.
- Do not inject the same place on your body again and again. Move injections around.

QUITTING

People quit in different ways. Some completely stop using all alcohol or drugs all at once. Others reduce their use over time. Some people quit at home, and others go to a treatment center. Some people rely only on their families, friends, and peers for support while others seek support from health workers or counselors.

Help may be available (see the resources for “Drugs and Alcohol” on page 562). If there are no groups or treatment programs in your area, you could start your own with someone who has been successful helping people stop using alcohol or drugs.

Overcoming Problems with Alcohol and Drugs

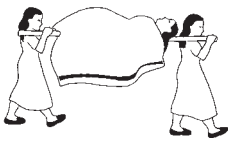
► *Stopping is often made possible with the help of others who support your efforts to stop using.*



starting a support group

► Some herbal teas can help the liver cleanse the body of poisonous effects of alcohol or drugs. A traditional healer may be able to suggest good local herbs.

► When someone quits alcohol or drugs after using for a long time, the lack of them in their body can cause seizures.



TRANSPORT!

Addiction and withdrawal

When a person is addicted to alcohol or a drug and quits using it, they will go through a period of withdrawal. During this time their body must get used to being without the drug.

After quitting, most signs of withdrawal will last from 1 to 14 days, depending on the drug, and how much and how often a person used it. Many people get through these days without problems. Still, it is important to have someone watch over the person and give help when needed.

Early signs of withdrawal include:

- slight shaking
- nervous and irritable feelings
- sweating
- trouble eating and sleeping
- aches all over the body
- *nausea, vomiting, stomach pain*

These signs may go away on their own. If they get worse, see a health worker immediately. If you are in alcohol withdrawal and help is far away, take 10 mg of diazepam by mouth on the way if you have it. This will prevent seizures. Take another 10 mg 6 hours later if the signs are not getting better. You can repeat the dose every 6 hours.

The following signs of withdrawal are an emergency. Get medical help immediately:

- mental confusion
- seeing strange things or hearing voices
- very fast heartbeat
- seizures



Supporting your body after you quit

After you quit, eating foods with a lot of *protein, vitamins, and minerals* (see page 166) will help your body as it recovers. Foods like liver, yeast, whole grains (including in breads), beans, and dark green vegetables are especially helpful. If you are having trouble eating, you can also take a multi-vitamin or B-complex vitamin that contains *folic acid*.

LEARNING TO STAY FREE OF DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

Once a person has started to overcome their problems with alcohol or drugs, they need to prevent drug misuse from developing again. This often means learning new ways to cope with challenges in their life. This is not easy to do and takes time. People who have misused alcohol or drugs need to feel more power to make changes in their own lives. One way to begin is to make small changes to prove to yourself and others that you can cope with problems.

Here are some ideas for building coping skills:

- Develop a network of support among those close to you and ask for help when you need it. It is much easier to solve problems when you can talk about them and work with others.
- Try to solve one problem at a time. This makes it feel less overwhelming to make changes in your life.
- Talk to a friend or someone you trust about things that worry or upset you or that make you sad or angry. This may help you understand more about why you feel the way you do and what you can do to feel better.
- Volunteer with other people on a project to improve your community. You can learn a lot about working for change, and this may also help you make personal changes.
- Meet regularly one-on-one or with groups of people who are also working to stay free of alcohol or drugs.



personal coping skills

► *If you are trying to stay free of alcohol or drugs, avoid places where you will feel pressure to use them. Work with others to organize social events where drugs and alcohol are not used.*



helping relationships

Living with Someone Who Has a Drinking or Drug Problem

► Women whose partners use injection drugs are at risk for getting HIV and hepatitis.



helping relationships

Someone in your family or household may have a problem with alcohol or drugs. Living with this can be very difficult for you, especially if the person does not want to change. You can help yourself and your family by:

- not blaming yourself. It is not always possible to help other people control their drug or alcohol use.
- focusing on the things you are doing well and acknowledging your efforts.
- finding a *support group* for you and your family. This is one of the best ways to help all of you cope with the problem.

I found out I was a people gatherer... What got me to move forward was other people around me. I did not think of myself as a leader, but there I was, getting people together to talk about this.



How to help someone with a drinking or drug problem:

- Talk to them about stopping when they are not drunk or on drugs.
- Help them admit they have a problem. This is the first step someone needs to take to use less or stop completely.
- Try not to blame them.
- Help them avoid situations where they may feel pressured to drink or take drugs. This means not spending time with people who have a drinking or drug problem, even if they are friends.
- Help them find other ways to cope with life's problems and to support their mental health.
- Help them make a plan for stopping and follow that plan.

Misuse and violence in the home

Misusing alcohol or drugs often makes violent situations worse, especially in the home. Women with partners who misuse drugs or alcohol often suffer abuse, injuries, and even death. See Chapter 18, "Violence Against Women."

To prevent drug and alcohol misuse successfully, you must consider the social forces that contribute to their use.

Meet with people from your community and discuss why alcohol or drugs have become important in community life. How did the problem start? What makes people use more? Are there new pressures on community members that make it harder for them to control their use of alcohol and drugs? What can you do to make drugs and alcohol less important in your community?

Once you understand the reasons for the problem, your group can work to reduce pressures to drink or use drugs.

Preventing Drug and Alcohol Misuse

A group of men and women in Chiapas, Mexico organized against *alcoholism* as part of their movement for democracy and social justice. They realized that people who drink heavily sometimes use force against others to get their way, just as the police had used force to control the community. The group gave warnings to individuals whose misuse of alcohol was hurting others and intervened when drunk men abused their wives. Alcohol played both negative and positive roles in the community. Shamans (spiritual leaders) often used sacred rum in their healing rituals. The group found ways to combat alcoholism and keep the spirit of their tradition by substituting nonalcoholic drinks in these rituals.

Helping young people resist alcohol and drugs

Many people who have drug and alcohol problems as adults began using them when they were young. Drugs or alcohol can seem like an easy way to have fun or escape from problems, especially if others are using them. Young people often feel confused and powerless about the many changes they must cope with—growing bodies, changing feelings, and new responsibilities. Young people are also influenced by many pressures, especially their friends, older people they admire, and advertising.

We can help young people learn to resist harmful pressures. Here are some ideas that have worked in many communities:

- Encourage the schools in your community to teach young people about the problems of using drugs and alcohol.
- Make it harder for people to sell drugs to young people.
- Organize to remove advertisements that make cigarettes and alcohol look glamorous and modern.
- Become a good role model. If you drink a lot or use drugs, chances are children around you will too.
- Talk to children about the problems drug and alcohol use can cause. They can then influence their friends.
- Help young people have fun without drugs and alcohol.
- Help children develop skills and self-esteem to resist the social pressure to use drugs and alcohol.

Find popular role models who speak out against drugs. Children may find the message more powerful if it comes from a person they admire.

