

Information Sheet - Institute of Welfare

Drug Abuse/Misuse

Drug use refers to the taking of a drug, either by swallowing, smoking, injecting or any other way of getting the drug into the blood stream, such as inserting it into the anus (often done by heavy cocaine snorters to avoid further damaging their noses) or insufflation - inhaling the drug contained in a fine spray.

The terms have different connotations, varying usually on ideas of harm or wrong or inappropriate purpose. Abuse and misuse imply that the use is harmful or done in the wrong way. Misuse, as harm, refers to use that is dependent or part of a problematic or harmful behaviour. Those who believe drug taking is wrong, except within a medical context, will tend to use the term misuse to refer to illicit drug taking. The government for example still uses this term, in keeping with their policies that aim to prevent non-medical drug taking.

Use by children is regarded as inappropriate and again the terms abuse and misuse often apply, such as in the case of volatile substance abuse which is often harmful and particular to young teenagers.

Drug use is used to refer to drug taking that, although it has some risk, it is not necessarily wrong or dangerous. The term does not imply that drug taking is wrong and is therefore preferred by many not wishing to value-judge the taking of drugs.

What are the most commonly used drugs?

The most commonly used mood altering drug used in the UK is caffeine – contained in tea, coffee, many soft drinks and colas, some confectionery, included in many medicines and available in over-the-counter stimulant preparations such as Pro Plus.

Apart from medicines in general the next most commonly used drug is alcohol, followed by the nicotine in cigarettes and other tobacco based products.

Alcohol and drugs can be broadly categorised in a way that helps with understanding how a person might be affected when using them:

DEPRESSANTS such as alcohol, tranquillisers, heroin, methadone and solvents slow down the central nervous system, affecting co-ordination and reaction times. Alcohol, for instance, used to create feelings of relaxation and disinhibition in social settings, can be inappropriate and cause problems in the workplace. Due to slow reactions, depressant use is particularly dangerous whilst driving or operating machinery.

STIMULANTS such as amphetamines ('speed'), ecstasy, cocaine, tobacco and caffeine increase the heart rate and give the user a sense of increased alertness and energy. People using some stimulants can become aggressive. Illicit stimulants might be used recreationally but the following day at work, a user can feel tired or depressed. Employees may also use stimulants to enable them to work long shifts but repeated and regular use could lead to problems or dependence.

HALLUCINOGENS such as cannabis, LSD and 'magic mushrooms' change the way people think, feel and perceive their surroundings. They can enhance appreciation of surroundings but can also cause anxiety or paranoia. As they distort the user's sense of time and perception, these drugs would again be dangerous in 'safety critical' jobs. Whilst none of the hallucinogens mentioned cause physical dependence, a user may become psychologically dependent on their effects. Cannabis is the most commonly used illegal drug in the UK.

When it comes to illegal drugs, the most commonly tried drugs are:

Cannabis

Amphetamine

Nitrites/ poppers

LSD

Magic mushrooms

Ecstasy

Solvents (aerosols, gases and glues)

Cocaine

Minor tranquillisers (not prescribed)

Heroin and crack cocaine

CRAVING / ADDICTION

Craving is usually associated with a craving for cigarettes and drugs such as cocaine or heroin, but can also be a craving for food, a loved one or even a place or ritual

In many instances, a craving for a drug can be enforced by a physical urge (the body needs the drug to maintain a desired state or avoid an unwanted one. In the case of heroin or alcohol addiction, a craving for the drug is usually strengthened by a strong desire to avoid withdrawal symptoms.

Most of our learned behaviour is established by associating an act, place, sight or smell with the desired outcome. In the case of an enjoyable effect, such as having a cigarette or whiskey to calm you down or make you more sociable, a feeling or place can trigger a craving.

In the case of addiction, a craving can be almost constant, particularly if the drug is being used to avoid withdrawal and acts as an aid for social situations and for coping. This is made worse if the people and places where the user socialises take the same drugs or use them for similar reasons.

An addiction refers to a drug dependency that has developed to such an extent that it has serious detrimental effects on the user and often their family as well. They may be using every day and be intoxicated most of the time and have great difficulty stopping drug use. Drugs take over their life. The term 'addiction' is usually applied to drugs but can be used with lots of activities that can become compulsive habits - like gambling or using arcade games or even eating, sex and 'healthy' pursuits like jogging. The term 'workaholic' has been used to describe people addicted to work and 'alcoholic' for someone who is addicted to alcohol.

Help and Support Contacts

www.talktofrank.com

www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

www.drugscope.org.uk

[National Drugs Helpline – 0800 77 66 00](tel:0800776600)

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