



**University of
Nottingham**
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

University Counselling Service

Alcohol and Drugs – Stay in Control

Some people cannot start the day without a cup of coffee to wake them up and others find a glass of wine is a pleasant way to unwind at the end of the day. Many people find social events less daunting after a few alcoholic drinks and a bar of chocolate provides a comforting treat.

The use of substances to change the way we feel is a normal part of everyday life. Different cultures adopt different drugs, according to local availability and circumstances. Customs and rules about drinking and drug use have developed over time to help societies avoid the less desirable effects.

Most people learn to use the drugs that are available in their society from their families, from friends, from experimentation and from making mistakes.

In Britain, most adults have drunk alcohol and a sizeable minority have taken drugs at some point in their lives.

What causes problems with alcohol and drugs?

Comparatively few people run into serious problems with alcohol or drug misuse, but it may be a contributory factor in depression, academic failure, relationship problems, debt, violence, breaking the law, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, self-harm, and suicide. Problems can be caused by the substance itself:

- Alcohol and other depressant drugs shut down the central nervous system, so that as you drink, relaxation turns into disinhibition. You may become the life and soul of the party, you may say things that hurt other people, lash out in anger, get into a car with someone you do not know, or have sex when you did not intend to. You may not remember what you have done. If you continue to drink to try to maintain the feeling of intoxication, your system will continue to shut down and you may fall asleep. An excessive alcohol intake can cause you to fall into a coma, or even stop breathing altogether.
- The effects of alcohol and drugs are unpredictable. How much you have eaten, how tired you are, what mood you are in, and a range of other factors will affect how you respond to them.
- Under the influence of stimulants, such as amphetamines or cocaine, you may feel confident and energised, or you may become agitated, paranoid, or aggressive.

- Hallucinogens - such as ecstasy; LSD; DMT; N-Bomb - and dissociative drugs – such as Ketamine; DXM; Salvia - can be an interesting and liberating experience or a terrifying nightmare.
- Mixing substances such as alcohol and other drugs can intensify the effect - not necessarily in a pleasant or safe way.
- If you are using recreational drugs, it is likely that you will have little idea of what you are consuming. There is no quality control, and they are likely to be cut with other cheaper, potentially harmful, substances.
- Some people are more vulnerable to the effects of drugs or may have pre-existing mental or physical health conditions. Drugs are sometimes a significant factor in serious mental health problems and the sudden deaths of young people.
- When you are drunk or out of it, you may be less concerned about having unprotected sex. This may put you at risk of an unwanted pregnancy or a sexually transmitted infection.

Regular drinking or drug use may cause problems:

- Many people enjoy the sensation of being intoxicated and want to get back to that state of mind. If you drink or use drugs on a regular basis, over time you will notice that, you need to consume more to achieve this effect. This means that your body is developing a tolerance.
- You may start to notice that you feel uncomfortable and edgy if you delay having your regular drink or drug. With some drugs, such as alcohol, nicotine and heroin, the withdrawal symptoms of disturbed sleep, insomnia, irritation, agitation, shaking, sweating and depression can be extremely uncomfortable.
- Drugs with a stimulant effect such as amphetamines and ecstasy leave regular users feeling lethargic, depressed, physically drained and lacking in motivation after the initial effect wears off.
- It may be difficult to get up for lectures or work in the morning and it is likely to affect your concentration and performance.
- You may try to relive these symptoms by further drinking or taking more drugs. Uppers, bracers, and refreshers offer only temporary relief, and it becomes increasingly difficult to get out of this cycle.

- A regular drinking or drug habit can be very expensive.
- You may find yourself getting involved in more risky activities, such as sharing needles or dealing, which puts you at risk of contracting Hepatitis or HIV or of getting a criminal record.

You do not have to be an alcoholic or an addict to run into difficulties:

There are times when you may be drinking or using drugs to try to cope with other issues.

- You might not feel part of the social scene, so drinking or using drugs may seem like a way of becoming part of a group that appears to be a bit different or more interesting.
- You might feel shy or uncomfortable with other people, until you have had a few drinks to loosen up.
- You might be feeling low or unhappy about something. Getting high or drunk might offer an escape from how you are feeling, or it may be the only time you can express how you feel. At these times, it is likely to make you feel even more miserable or angry. This can be a real downer for your friends and the people around you.
- Taking hallucinogens, like LSD or mushrooms, when you are worried or troubled, or which your system simply cannot cope with, can induce paranoia or unpleasant delusions that may be very disturbing and may affect you for a long time. Flashbacks and psychosis can be longer-term effects.

If any of this sound familiar, you might want to ask yourself, is there is anything about your drinking or drug use that you want to change?

How can you help yourself?

- If you want to avoid all risks with alcohol and drugs, do not use them at all. Otherwise, be aware of what you are taking and keep yourself informed about the risks. A link to a directory of services is at the end of this guide.
- If you are going out drinking or clubbing, make sure you are amongst friends that you can trust. Try to make sure that at least one of you stays sober, to keep an

eye on the drinks, to arrange taxis at the end of the evening and to make sure you all get home safely.

- Driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, puts you and other people at risk and you could lose your licence. Get a taxi or an Uber – preferably with friends - or find out about late public transport.
- You may feel disinhibited by alcohol or stimulated by drugs, so carry condoms and insist on using them. Better still; arrange to meet at another time, when your judgement is clearer.
- Let your friends know what you are taking, so that if you run into problems, they can help. The security and door staff at clubs and pubs are usually trained to provide assistance but do not rely on this.
- Stay in control of what you consume. If a stranger offers to buy you a drink or sell you drugs, it is safer to refuse. Your drink may be spiked “for a laugh”, or worse. Drugs may be cut with rubbish or may be purer than you expect.
- Mixing drugs and alcohol or using alcohol or cannabis to come down off other drugs, is unpredictable and risky. If you are taking anything for medical reasons (such as antihistamines, antidepressants, paracetamol), remember that these will also react with alcohol and other drugs.
- Keep yourself safe. Never share needles. Get clean needles free from the Health Shop needle exchange. [The Health Shop](#)
- If you are worried about something you have taken, contact your GP for advice. If you feel unwell, go to the Emergency Department at Queens Medical Centre, or go to your GP.
- If you are feeling low or stressed out, drinking, or using drugs is likely to make you feel worse. Think about doing something different that will lift your mood.
- If you are finding it difficult to study, or if you are worried about your work or exams, arrangements can be made to help you. Talk to your personal tutor, Support and Wellbeing Officer or someone you trust in your department or school.
- Sometimes drinking or drug use is a way of trying to cope with a bad patch. You may be able to get back in control, preferably with some support from friends or family. It can be a relief just to tell someone else what you are going through. Not

everyone will be able to help, but some people will try to understand your feelings, or may have had similar experiences.

- Try keeping a record for a week of what you are consuming. Ask yourself, how much does it cost? What are the consequences? Hangovers? Missing lectures? Fights? Arguments? Unwanted sexual encounters? Be honest with yourself. Are you happy with the way you are drinking, or using drugs?
- Set a limit on what you consume or how much you are going to spend. As a guide for alcohol consumption, most healthy adults will not experience a problem if they drink 14 units in a week spread out over three or more days. A unit is a small glass of wine, a pub measure of spirits or a half-pint of ordinary beer or lager.
- Have a few alcohol or drug free days each week, to give your body a chance to recover. If you find this difficult, it may indicate that you have developed a problem.
- Remember that most “recreational” drug use is illegal, including cannabis. Ecstasy is a class “A” drug, like heroin and cocaine. If you are stopped by the police, you may be prosecuted for possession or for dealing. This may be particularly serious if you want a career in medicine, nursing, or the law. Possessing illegal drugs in your accommodation may have consequences for your housemates and could get you evicted or prosecuted.
- There are many people in the university to whom you can turn for support. These may include your personal tutor, Support and Wellbeing Officer, residential support staff or any other member of support staff. They will be able to put you in touch with someone who can offer specialist help if necessary. There are also other members of the university such as Chaplains, the Students’ Union Welfare and Wellbeing Officer, and the Residential Support Teams whom you may wish to approach.
- There are various organisations providing advice, information, and support and there is useful information on the internet and in self-help books. A link to our directory of resources can be found at the end of this leaflet.

How can you help someone else?

- If you are concerned about a friend or a housemate, you could try telling them how you feel. They may be a bit uncomfortable and defensive, so try to get them to talk about what is bothering them, rather than confronting them.

- Sometimes listening can be a significant help and problems can seem a bit less overwhelming when they are shared with someone else. This might be the help the person needs to start turning things around. You do not have to provide answers or solve their problems.
- If they want to cut down, or cut out, their drinking or drug use, you may want to support them by arranging nights in, or out, that do not involve drink or drugs, and even cutting down yourself.
- It is not helpful to try to control other people's drinking or drug use by confiscating or hiding their drink or drugs. This will lead to arguments and bad feelings. They will need to take control for themselves or get specialised help.
- You might encourage your friend to talk with someone else at the university. This could be their personal tutor, Support and Wellbeing Officer, their academic tutor or someone else in their department or school, particularly if they are running into problems with their work. If they live in halls, residential staff there may be a useful source of information and support.
- If you are with a person who is having a negative experience with drugs, they may be very frightened. Help them to find somewhere quiet, away from noise and lights and reassure them. If you continue to be concerned, encourage them to get medical attention at the Emergency Department of the Queen's Medical Centre, or from their own GP.
- If the person is unconscious, or has taken an overdose, they will require medical assessment immediately. If they are not willing, or able, to attend hospital or their GP, you will have to act, or tell someone else who can take responsibility. If the incident happens in halls, this should be the hall manager, or residential support assistant. If the incident happens in your house, you should phone the emergency services (dial 999 from any phone). If you know what your friend has taken, give this information to the paramedics. It could save your friend's life.
- It can be very frustrating and difficult to have a housemate, or a friend, with a drug or alcohol problem and you may need advice or support for yourself. It may be that their behaviour is disrupting your work, or your peace of mind and you may want some advice on what to do. There are services in the university that can support and advise you.

When is specialist help appropriate?

You may want to contact someone who is able to help if you find that: -

- You cannot manage a day without a drink, or without taking drugs.
- You have financial problems caused by your drinking, or drug use.
- Your drinking, or drug use, is leading to conflict with your family and /or friends.
- You regularly miss lectures because of drinking sessions, or drug use, or you are finding it difficult to concentrate or motivate yourself to work.

If so, there are resources at the university and in Nottingham listed in a separate leaflet, where you will find information, advice, support, and treatment. They will help you consider what approach might best suit you and assist you in getting the help you need.

If you prefer to make an initial approach to someone you know, your personal tutor, your Support and Wellbeing Officer, hall staff or any other members of support staff, can put you in touch with more specialist help. The Chaplains, the Students Union Welfare and Wellbeing officer, and the residential support teams in halls, will also be able to advise and support you.