

DRUG ABUSE & AIDS

Behavior associated with drug abuse is the single largest factor in the spread of HIV infection in the United States. HIV is the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, which causes Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, or AIDS. AIDS is a condition characterized by a defect in the body's natural immunity to diseases, and individuals who suffer from it are at risk for severe illnesses that are usually not a threat to anyone whose immune system is working properly. Although many individuals who have AIDS or carry HIV may live for many years with treatment; there is no known cure or vaccine.

Using or sharing unsterile needles, cotton swabs, rinse water, and cookers, such as when injecting heroin, cocaine, or other drugs, leaves a drug abuser vulnerable to contracting or transmitting HIV. Another way people may be at risk for contracting HIV is simply by using drugs of abuse, regardless of whether a needle and syringe are involved. Research sponsored by NIDA and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism has shown that drug and alcohol use can interfere with judgment about sexual and other behavior and thereby affect the likelihood of engaging in unplanned and unprotected sex. This increases the risk for contracting HIV from infected sex partners. Noninjection drugs, such as crack cocaine, also contribute to the spread of the epidemic when users trade sex for money, or when they engage in high-risk sexual behaviors while under the influence of drugs.

Prevention of HIV Among IDUs (Injection Drug Users)

Evidence suggests that drug abuse treatment can help prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, especially when combined with prevention and community-based outreach programs for at-risk people. These efforts can reduce or eliminate drug use and drug-related HIV risk behaviors such as needle sharing, as well as help to reduce unsafe sexual practices. In addition, drug treatment programs can help to reduce the spread of other blood-borne infections, including hepatitis B and C viruses. Adequate medical care for HIV/AIDS and related illnesses is also critical to reducing and preventing the spread of new infections.¹

Teen Facts

- Teens are more likely to have sex if they and their partner have been drinking. They're also more likely not to have protected sex (use a condom). This can lead to unplanned pregnancy or the risk of getting a sexually transmitted disease, like syphilis or HIV.
- Girls get HIV infection and AIDS more easily from boys than boys do from girls.
- A growing concern is the rapid increase of AIDS among young adults, meaning they contracted HIV during adolescence. Alcohol is also involved in this equation for two reasons.

First, there's the well-known uninhibiting effect of alcohol and the impaired judgment that is a part of that. Sexual encounters are more likely when drinking. It is less likely that condoms will be used, increasing the risk of a variety of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV. Sexual encounters are also more likely to be casual, involving partners with little history and no ongoing relationship. With the advent of AIDS, the important message to be conveyed is that there is no longer, if there ever was, such a thing as casual sex. The stakes are high, and the costs are no longer simply psychological wounds.

The second important factor that has considerable significance in thinking about adolescents, alcohol, and AIDS goes beyond simply altered judgment. It appears that one of the effects of alcohol – in anyone, not just in those who are alcohol dependent or who drink heavily – is to interfere temporarily with the immune system. Possibly for a day or two alcohol has seemingly “turned down the volume” on the body's defenses. Thus, the body's usually available means of fighting off infections and viruses are not up to par. This allows infections to gain a foothold, which may otherwise not have happened.²

Why is Sex Risky? It Can Lead to AIDS

- Unprotected sex with an infected partner is the most common way HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, is spread. Another way is sharing needles to inject drugs.
- Your sex partner may have had sex with someone who shared a needle to inject drugs with an HIV infected person.
- The more sex partners you have, the more chance you have of getting AIDS.
- Two sure ways to avoid the AIDS virus are not having sex and not sharing needles.
- If you choose to have sex, always use a condom to help reduce the risk of getting AIDS.³

Make Your Decision About Sex With a Clear Head – Without Drugs

Sometimes you can feel pressured to have sex when you may not want to, and drugs make it harder to say no. Pressure about sex can be hard to deal with – it can come from your boyfriend or girlfriend, from the crowd you hang out with, or even your own feelings.

The first thing to remember is that you're in charge of your body and what you choose to do with it.

The second thing to remember is that there is a lot at stake; a decision about sex can have consequences that last a lifetime.³

Making Your Plan

Think about who you are and what's important to you; think about how using drugs and having sex could affect that. When you have a plan, it's easier to handle situations where you want to have fun with friends but don't want to use drugs or have sex.

If someone pressures you about drugs, you can say nicely but firmly, "I'm not interested" or "I don't do drugs."

If someone pressures you about sex, you can show where you stand by saying: "I'm not ready for it yet" or "Maybe it feels right for you, but it's not for me."³

It's a Fact

- Teens who use condoms during sex tend to use them less if they've been drinking or smoking dope.
- More than 20% of the people who have AIDS are in their 20s. Since it can take up to 10 years or more for symptoms to start, many got infected in their teens.³

You May Already Know This But...

- YOU CAN'T GET AIDS from hugging, holding hands, mosquitoes or bugs.
- YOU CAN GET AIDS from unprotected sexual contact.
- HIV is the human immunodeficiency virus that causes AIDS.
- You cannot tell if someone has the HIV virus by looking at him or her. A blood test is the only way to be sure.
- AIDS is fatal.³

1. *NIDA InfoFacts: Drug Abuse and AIDS*, 3/30/05, www.nida.nih.gov

2. *Loosening the Grip*, by Jean Kinney, Publisher Jean Kinney, M.S.W., Publisher McGraw Hill

3. <http://www.sadd.org/issues2.htm> 3/06 SADD Issue

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