

STREET DRUGS

A desire to experience an altered state of consciousness has been a feature of human culture from time immemorial. In the search for mood and mind altering substances, humankind has long experimented and taken risks.

Perhaps more than ever before, we are surrounded by legal drugs in coffee, alcohol and cigarettes, let alone in prescribed medications such as sleeping tablets, tranquillizers and opioid painkillers. Using these can be a temptingly easy way to change or control ones mood and psychological state. Advertising and marketing may enhance the appeal of substance use. There are fashions in drug use and the use of a certain drug may be associated with a particular (and perhaps desirable) lifestyle or subculture.

It is likely that you will encounter illicit drug use either prior to or at university. It is estimated that at least 60% of students will have tried cannabis at some time or another. About 33% will experiment with other substances. In a survey of Cambridge University students carried out between 1995 and 1998, 10% reported using cannabis on a weekly basis and 30% at some point during the previous year. Between 3% and 7% reported using other drugs such as ecstasy and amphetamines in the previous year. ¹

The majority of occasional users come to no long-term harm. They are also unlikely to harm others. Inevitably, some will run into problems, and, more seriously, some risk death as a direct result of their drug use.

Substances Used

Recreational drugs can be classified as stimulants, depressants and hallucinogens. Some drugs however can overlap these categories, for example ecstasy is both a stimulant and a hallucinogen, and, while low grade cannabis (hash) works as a depressant, stronger versions such as skunk may also have hallucinogenic properties.

Stimulants

Stimulants work by increasing neural activity in the brain. They have the short-term effect of making one feel lively, talkative, confident and euphoric. They are attractive to club and party-goers because they enhance sensory experience and postpone the need for sleep. As their effect wears off, however, they can leave you feeling restless, irritable or washed out. There may, therefore, be a temptation to avoid these 'coming down' feelings by taking more of the drug.

Long-term use or high doses can lead to extreme agitation, insomnia, delusions, hallucinations and paranoia particularly in susceptible individuals.

The most common stimulants are:

- Amphetamines (speed)
- Ecstasy (an hallucinogenic amphetamine)
- Tobacco
- Anabolic steroids - used illegally to enhance strength and performance in sport
- Amyl nitrite (poppers)
- Cocaine
- Crack cocaine

Depressants

Depressants work by depressing the central nervous system. They can therefore induce a state of relaxation or sedation as well as reducing the intensity of pain and of emotions such as fear, anger or anxiety.

They can also have short term effects of:

- Reducing intellectual ability and the ability to concentrate or retain information
- Reducing motivation and energy
- Reducing manual dexterity e.g. the ability to operate machinery, drive, climb or swim.

Examples of depressants are:

- Opiates such as heroin/diamorphine (smack) morphine, pethidine and methadone
- Benzodiazopines (tranquillizers such as Valium and Temazepam). These may be prescribed for short-term use to combat anxiety but they also have an illegal market
- Cannabis (many street names such as hash, dope, weed, gear). Long-term use or high doses may lead to depression, increased anxiety, an inability to deal effectively with emotions, short-term memory loss, and insomnia
- Alcohol

Regular use of some of these drugs (e.g. opiates and benzodiazopines) may lead to physical dependency since withdrawal may result in unpleasant physical symptoms. There is also the danger of a serious, or even fatal, overdose due to the depressing of physical systems such as the heart and lungs.

Hallucinogens

These drugs enhance sensory perceptions - sight, sound, smell and touch.

On a pleasant 'good trip' a person may experience increased self-awareness, and mystical or ecstatic feelings. On a 'bad trip' there may be unpleasant feelings of disorientation, panic, and/or paranoia. These may last several hours. People can also suffer 'flashbacks' where they relive experiences when tripping. This can be intensely disorientating and anxiety provoking.

A bad trip is more likely in someone who is already anxious, depressed or unstable, or who takes the drug in an insecure environment. It may not be affected by previous experience of the drug or by dosage.

Hallucinogens include:

- LSD
- Hallucinogenic stimulants such as Ecstasy (see above)
- Magic mushrooms
- High potency cannabis such as 'skunk'.

Possible side effects and dangers of drugs

All drugs (medicinal as well as illegal) have the potential for unwanted, and often unexpected, effects. They are usually substance and individual specific.

- The effects of a drug may vary according to the mental state of the person taking it. A strong mood-altering substance may trigger, or exacerbate an underlying emotional instability.
- Pleasurable effects followed by less pleasant after-effects may tempt someone into repeated use. Crack cocaine, for instance can tempt someone into repetitive use very quickly because it gives a very strong but short-term 'burst' of euphoria followed by an equivalently intense coming-down which may include high anxiety as well as physical malaise. In addition, physiological tolerance may build up with some drugs so that more of the drug is needed to induce the desired effect.
- Withdrawal from a drug in regular, or high dosage use may lead to physical symptoms i.e. there may be a physical dependency on the drug.
- Drugs may interact with each other (including legal ones such as alcohol). Some mixtures may even prove life-threatening.
- With any illicit drug there is no quality control so there is a constant danger of variable strength and of adulteration with undesirable substances. Sources of cannabis may vary in potency by 10-fold, from 2% hash to 20% skunk. In the case of heroin, in particular, it is the unexpectedly pure drug, which may kill someone who has insufficient tolerance.

- Injecting drugs involves the risk of introducing infections directly into the blood-stream. Sharing of needles is particularly dangerous as it may lead to cross-infections (e.g. HIV and hepatitis)
- Drugs taken during pregnancy may damage the foetus.

Heavy or regular drug use may be a symptom of a deeper malaise. People may turn to drugs in an attempt to avoid confronting problems or internal distress. This may work in the short-term but can come to have severe financial, social, legal or physical consequences.

Seeking Help

The BCUC counsellors offer a confidential and non-judgmental place in which to talk things through, particularly any underlying problems which may be linked with the drug use. However, we would refer students to other agencies for help with physical dependency or medical support.

National Drugs Helpline

Tel: 0800 77 66 00, URL

www.ndh.org.uk

Free confidential 24-hour advice line.

Information and educational resources

Narcotics Anonymous

Tel. 020 7730 0009

www.na.org

Self-help group for drug users.

Release (for legal information)

Tel. 020 7729 9904, Emergency line: 020 7603 8654

www.release.org.uk

Provides advice on drug use and associated legal matters. Useful if a person is arrested for a drug-related offence.