



## SIGNS OF DRUG ABUSE

This is a must read for all parents. There is increasing, easy access, to all sorts of drugs in our community. Knowing a few simple signs could be helpful for parents, employers or anyone when it comes to dealing with abnormal behaviour and helping family and friends.

According to the 2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey in Australia, approximately 38% of all Australians, aged 14 years or older, have used an illicit drug at some time in their lives. Approximately 13.4% had used illicit drugs in the previous 12 months. The most commonly used drugs were marijuana/cannabis, ecstasy, anxiety-relieving drugs, and opioids or narcotics. In addition, there has been use of methamphetamine and cocaine.

This article will give a brief overview of the signs and behavioural aspects of these common drugs of abuse.

### Cocaine

Its street names include C, coke, snow, white lady, toot, candy, Charlie, blow, white dust and stardust. Names such as base and crack are also used.

The physical signs to look for in a person include nose abnormalities like the loss of hair from the nostril from snorting. The right hand often holds the cocaine and there could be a stain at the wrist area where there is a groove. There can be holes or defects in the nose septum in up to 10% of users. Users who use hot pipes can have burns or calluses on the lips, thumbs and index and little fingers. There may be some areas of inflamed gums where the cocaine powder may have been applied and irritated the gum.

Some users will have a single long fingernail, often on the little finger, which is used as a "scoop" for the powder – sometimes residue is seen under the nail. Cocaine users get pneumonia more often and can exhibit black sputum called "crack lung" up to 48hrs after using the drug.

### Marijuana

Its street names are weed, grass, pot, green, budd, choof, Mary-Jane, smoke.

Signs to look for are confusion, red, inflamed eyes, dulled reflexes, a fast beating heart and anxiety. Smoking 3-4 joints a day is equivalent to 20 cigarettes a day, so some people may have a cough or bronchitis. If recently smoking, a green tinge can be seen on the tongue.

### Ecstasy

Its street names include pills, pingers, beans, lollies, roundies, dingers, coins, "eckies".

Users exhibit hyped up effects like fast heart, breathing fast, hypertension, abnormal heart rhythms and heart attacks. The pupils can be dilated and the person is sensitive to light.

These people feel the need to experience touch a lot so they are constantly touching themselves, stroking their hair, and running their hands over their face and bodies.

These people can develop serotonin syndrome, especially if they are taking antidepressants and some painkillers, which in addition to the ecstasy, will lead to hypothermia, grinding and spasming of the jaw, head jerking, and nystagmus (loss of eye movement control). Long term use leads to psychosis and obsessive compulsive behaviour.

## Heroin

Its street names include smack, H, hammer, sweet juice, china white, horse, skag.

Most users are lethargic and slow, and have pinpoint pupils. Their bowel is very sluggish and they can get constipated. An overdose can lead to them stopping breathing and going into a coma.

## Methamphetamine

Its street names include crystal meths, ice, crystal, base, paste, and shabu.

Users are overstimulated and can get abnormal heart rhythms, hypertension, and breathe fast. They exhibit dilated pupils and complain of a dry mouth and inability to sleep. They sweat a lot and are restless. They can complain of a headache and anxiety, as well as blurred vision and tight muscles. Even young users can have profound tooth decay and this is called "meth mouth".

Some users get an intense itch which they call "meth bugs". Ultimately these people develop a severe psychosis with often paranoid delusions, hallucinations and can even get hypothermia, seizures, coma, stroke, heart failure and death.

It is important to detect drug abuse amongst co-workers and loved ones. Being aware of some of these symptoms will enable you to suspect when this might be happening and encourage the person to get some help. The first stop is the family doctor.

Helpful agencies are listed below:

<http://www.drughelp.org.nz>

<http://www.cads.org.nz>