

# HEALTHY HIGHS

## *Drugs*



### **BEING DRUG AWARE**

Drugs, drugs, drugs. When you hear the word “drugs,” the first thing that comes to mind is probably an image of someone using heroin, snorting cocaine, or taking LSD. You might think of a person using ecstasy or injecting meth. And you would probably consider someone smoking marijuana as “using drugs.” These are all examples of drug use, each from an illegal perspective.

There’s much more to drug use than this. In addition to illegal drug use, there’s the use of prescription drugs and over-the-counter drugs. These can be very helpful, when used for medicinal purposes and when used as specified. Prescription drugs, however, can be abused if someone uses them for purposes other than those for which they were prescribed. This may include using the drug for a period less than what was prescribed, using the drug after its expiration date, or taking these in doses larger or smaller than prescribed. Additionally, abuse can happen when a person uses someone else’s prescription drug, feels a dependency of a prescription drug, uses it for purposes other than that for which it was prescribed, or uses it in a format other than that for which it was designed (e.g., crushing OxyContin and ingesting it all at once, bypassing the time release feature of the drug and thereby resulting in many overdoses and deaths).

What’s important here is that prescription drugs are, in fact, drugs. They are substances that were designed for medical purposes, have gone through extensive testing, and should be used only by the intended individuals as intended and prescribed. If you use the drug outside of these parameters, this is abuse and can, in some cases, be termed illicit drug use.

The same is true for over-the-counter drugs; these have been designed and tested, and are available for specific medicinal purposes. While they are typically not as potent as



the prescribed drugs, they, too, can have negative side effects and can be abused. What's important to know about over-the-counter (OTC) drugs is that they, too, are drugs. Some of these drugs were previously classified as prescription drugs. So, the designation (as prescription or OTC) is the most current designation for these substances.

Further, the designations or availability are not necessarily permanent. Based on new discoveries or newly understood effects of drugs, some prescription drugs get removed from the market due to harmful effects, or consequences of concern that have been discovered. And some drugs that are OTC receive new scrutiny regarding how available they are, or where they may be kept in the store (e.g., behind the prescription counter). These factors change over time, as new knowledge and new consequences become available.

Another consideration is that many controversies about drugs do exist within our society – and these controversies exist for illegal drugs, prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs, and more. For example, should marijuana use be illegal? Why is it kept as a Schedule I drug, and is it addictive? Is Ritalin over-prescribed by doctors? Is Ecstasy as harmful as presented? Should certain over-the-counter drugs be limited as to the quantity that can be purchased? Not only do questions like these present a variety of issues, but they also provide the opportunity to learn more by having educated discussions.

Related to these controversies are the various new drugs that always seem to appear. When crack first appeared, it caused a large amount of concern that was quite justified. There was "ice", and heroin keeps reappearing. There was ecstasy, OxyContin, and Ritalin abuse. What's next? And what does this continued emergence of new drugs tell us about ourselves? Furthermore, what can we do about it?

## **BEING AWARE OF WHAT DRUGS MEANS TO YOU**

What does all of this say for you? That is, in order to keep you and your friends safe regarding drugs, what is important for you to know and do?

### **Here are a few thoughts that you may wish to consider:**

1. **Each of us is surrounded by drugs.** You have already made decisions about what you choose to put into your body. Already in your life, you have faced choices about illegal drugs, prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs, and illicit drug use. "Drugs" means more than what is illegal. "Drugs" has to do with the various substances that



you choose to put into your body or not put into your body. “Drugs” is also something that is known by several descriptive labels – in addition to “drugs”, we often hear the terms “substance” and “chemicals.” Whatever it is called, these items act upon and interact with our bodies in a variety of ways.

- 2. You may have had some experiences – alone, with family members, friends, or others – where unanticipated side effects were experienced.** It may have been due to not following directions (e.g., not following the instruction to use the drug with a meal) or it may be due to your body’s unique reaction to the substance. Various drugs with different chemical compositions exist to have the desired effects on people; thus, if a drug has a side effect that you do not like or are unsure about, it’s important to check with a physician to see if another drug would have the desired effect without the undesirable effect(s).
- 3. As you think about drug use, it’s important to reflect on the fact that, while your body is quite robust and resilient, it is also a delicate and complicated system that has reactions to what is put into it.** Specifically, the body does not know what you are putting into it (i.e., whether it is legal or illegal, prescribed or not) or why you are using it (e.g., for medicinal purposes or for recreational purposes); your body just reacts in accordance with the properties of the drug. Some individuals have food allergies, and others have negative reactions to drugs like penicillin. Individuals do respond differently to drugs, so just because a friend has a certain reaction (whether safe or unsafe) doesn’t mean that you will have the same reaction.
- 4. It is very important to look at the reasons underlying your choices about drugs.** What is it that you are trying to address with your decisions about drugs? If you’re trying to treat a medical condition, does it need a doctor’s guidance or recommendation? If you’ve been using an over-the-counter drug for a while to treat something, what is the underlying cause of that situation? If you’re faced with a decision about using an illicit drug for recreational purposes, what is it that you are attempting to accomplish and, more important, can that be met in ways that are safer and legal?
- 5. Getting good and current information is vitally important.** It is important that knowledge about drugs is obtained from reliable sources, rather than from friends or acquaintances, or just from an article on the web. If you hear something that you wonder about, check with your physician, check with a knowledgeable expert, and check with reputable sources. There may be only partial information available, there may be new insights, and there may be different points of view. It’s important to



know that much of the knowledge about drugs is changing, particularly as new discoveries and insights are made. Sadly, many people don't want to be bothered with the facts. You have the opportunity and challenge to do otherwise – being informed, gathering this from quality sources, and sharing this new knowledge with others.

Many decisions about drugs by college students and others are based on limited (and sometimes inaccurate or incomplete) information and heightened expectations. Our society as a whole seems increasingly geared toward “quick fixes,” “instant answers,” and “magic bullets.” What is important to you in this time of transition to college is to learn skills of decision-making about your life, with choices about drugs being an important part of that. It's also an important time for involving yourself in others' decisions – if you have an opinion about someone else's choices, it's important to share your opinions with that person. If you think someone else should be seeking medical attention rather than using the OTC drug, or if you're concerned about someone's continued and regular use of marijuana, it's important to speak up about that – that type of comment or intervention can turn out to make quite a difference in that person's life.

Poor choices can have very negative consequences, and sometimes these are permanent or irreversible. Some decisions can, sadly, represent the last decision made by a person. However, the process of making choices and gathering more information can be very exciting, as it helps set up the process of how you manage your life, how you make decisions, how you listen to your body, how you respond to what your body tells you, how you anticipate and prevent problematic results, and how you live your life to its fullest – safely, productively, and enjoyably.

**David S. Anderson, Ph.D.**

*Professor*

*Director, Center for the Advancement of Public Health*

*School of Recreation, Health, and Tourism*

*College of Education and Human Development*

