What do I need to know about alcohol, other drugs and teen health?

As parents, you want what is best for your child. You want them to be healthy, safe and successful in achieving their goals. Unfortunately, underage drinking and drug use can lead to serious problems that interfere with your hopes and dreams for them.

Early use of alcohol and other drugs puts teens at greater risk for addiction and other health problems, failing in school, and career choices limited by arrests and lack of education. Alcohol, marijuana and nicotine are the drugs most commonly used by youth. Alcohol and marijuana use:

- **Can begin as early as elementary school.** The Washington Healthy Youth Survey shows that by the time teens are in the 10th grade, one in five has started using alcohol or marijuana regularly.
- **Can harm the developing teen brain.** Alcohol and marijuana can harm areas of the brain that control motor coordination, impulse control, memory, learning and judgment. Because the teen brain is still developing, it is more vulnerable than an adult's brain to the effects of alcohol and other drugs. This can lead to school failure and dropout.
- **Is associated with the top three causes of teen deaths:** accidents (including traffic fatalities and drowning), homicide, and suicide. Excessive drinking is responsible for more than 4,300 deaths among underage youth each year. In 2010, there were 189,000 emergency room visits nationwide by those under age 21 for injuries related to alcohol. *(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).*
- **Increases the risk of STDs and pregnancy.** Teens who drink and use other drugs are more likely to engage in sex and to have sex with four or more partners than teens who don't use (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy). Such behavior can result in AIDS, other sexually transmitted diseases, and pregnancy.
- **Can lead to addiction.** The National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that youth who start drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence or abuse as adults, than those who begin drinking at age 21 or later. During 2015, 78 percent of Washington youth (12-17) who received publicly-funded addiction treatment listed marijuana as their primary drug *(Washington Department of Social and Health Services).*
- **Isn't safer at home under your supervision.** Teens can overdose on alcohol or marijuana just as easily at home. You and your teen can be held legally liable for property damage, assault, injuries, and deaths resulting from underage use on your property. If you allow your teen to use alcohol or marijuana at home, they are more likely to think it's okay when they are with their friends.

What can I do to keep my children healthy and safe?

You have the greatest influence in your child's decisions about alcohol and other drugs – even during the teen years. The top reason most kids give for not using drugs? They don't want to disappoint their parents. Here are some proven ways to help your child avoid alcohol and other drugs:

- **Talk with your children** early and often about the risks of using alcohol, marijuana and other drugs. Teach them the risks to their health and future. Kids who learn a lot about the dangers of drugs from their parents are 50 percent less likely to use alcohol and drugs than those who don't. *(Partnership Attitude Tracking Survey).* Get tips for starting the conversation at www.StartTalkingNow.org.
- **Bond with your child.** Children who feel close to their parents are less likely to use alcohol or marijuana. Stay actively involved in their lives, eat dinner together and do fun family activities. Recognize them often for making positive and healthy choices.
- **Set boundaries.** Have clear rules about no alcohol or marijuana use, and consistently enforce reasonable consequences for breaking the rules. Role play situations where your child might be offered alcohol or other drugs, and practice ways to refuse them.
- **Monitor your child.** Know where they are, who they are with, and what they are doing. Call their friends' parents to be sure there is supervision.
- **Never provide** alcohol or marijuana to anyone under the age of 21. It's illegal to provide to minors and to allow them to use. If you have alcohol, marijuana or prescription drugs at home, lock them up.

Talk with your teen about any concerns and seek help if necessary by calling the:

Washington Recovery Help Line

24-Hour Help for Substance Abuse, Problem Gambling & Mental Health

1.866.789.1511

(206.461.3219 TTY)

For more resources, visit:

StartTalkingNow.org

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How can I spot alcohol or drug use in my teens?

If you suspect your teen is using alcohol, marijuana or other drugs, the Partnership for Drug Free Kids suggests the following five ways to find out if you might be right. Even if you don't find evidence, trust your instincts.

- **Use your nose.** Have a face-to-face conversation when your teen comes home from a night out with friends. If your child has been using alcohol, tobacco or marijuana, the smell will be on their breath, clothing and hair.
- **Take a closer look.** When your teen gets back from going out with friends, are their pupils constricted or dilated? Do they have trouble focusing on you? Does their face look red or flushed?
- **Watch for mood changes.** How is your teen acting after a night out with friends? Are they loud and obnoxious, or laughing hysterically at nothing? Are they stumbling into furniture and walls, tripping over their own feet and knocking things over? Are they sullen, withdrawn, and unusually tired? Queasy? These are all signs your teen could have been using alcohol, marijuana, or something else.
- **Monitor driving and the car.** Is your teen driving more reckless after being with friends? Is there a new dent in the car they claim to know nothing about? Does the inside of the car smell like marijuana or alcohol? Are there any bottles, pipes, bongs, or other drug paraphernalia rolling around on the floor or in the glove box? If you find anything, challenge your teen on it immediately. Tell them what you've discovered and why you're concerned.
- **Keep an eye out for deceit or secretiveness.** Are your teen's weekend plans starting to sound a little fishy? Are they being vague about where they're going? Can they describe the movie they just saw? Does your teen tell you that parents will be at the party they are going to but can't give you a phone number and comes home acting intoxicated? Does your teen get in way past curfew with a long list of excuses? Your intuition is your best parenting tool. It's time to confront your child and talk about what you are seeing. It's important to intervene early and get help if needed.

A parent's guide to raising drug-free kids

Washington Healthy Youth Coalition

Keeping youth and young adults free from alcohol and marijuana