

Health Risks Related to the Use of Drugs and Alcohol

Alcohol Health Risks

Short-Term Health Risks¹

Excessive alcohol use has immediate effects that increase the risk of many harmful health conditions. These are most often the result of binge drinking and include the following:

- Injuries, such as motor vehicle crashes, falls, drownings, and burns.
- Violence, including homicide, suicide, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence.
- Alcohol poisoning, a medical emergency that results from high blood alcohol levels.
- Risky sexual behaviors, including unprotected sex or sex with multiple partners. These behaviors can result in unintended pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.
- Miscarriage and stillbirth or fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs) among pregnant women.

Long-Term Health Risks²

Over time, excessive alcohol use can lead to the development of chronic diseases and other serious problems including:

- High blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, liver disease, and digestive problems.
- Cancer of the breast, mouth, throat, esophagus, liver, and colon.
- Learning and memory problems, including dementia and poor school performance.
- Mental health problems, including depression and anxiety.
- Social problems, including lost productivity, family problems, and unemployment.
- Alcohol dependence, or alcoholism.

Substance Abuse Health Risks³

Cocaine:

Short-Term: Narrowed blood vessels; enlarged pupils; increased body temperature, heart rate, and blood pressure; headache; abdominal pain and nausea; euphoria; increased energy, alertness; insomnia, restlessness; anxiety; erratic and violent behavior; panic attacks; paranoia; psychosis; heart rhythm problems; heart attack; stroke; seizure; and coma.

Long-Term: Loss of sense of smell; nosebleeds; nasal damage and trouble swallowing from snorting; infection and death of bowel tissue from decreased blood flow; poor nutrition and weight loss; lung damage from smoking; premature delivery; low birth weight; deficits in self-regulation and attention in school-aged children prenatally exposed; risk of HIV; hepatitis; and other infectious diseases from shared needles.

Combination with Alcohol: Greater risk of cardiac toxicity than from either drug alone

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/fact-sheets/alcohol-use.htm>

² <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/fact-sheets/alcohol-use.htm>

³ https://d14rmgtrwzf5a.cloudfront.net/sites/default/files/nida_commonlyuseddrugs_final_printready.pdf

Heroin:

Short-Term: Euphoria; dry mouth; itching; nausea; vomiting; analgesia; slowed breathing and heart rate.

Long-Term: Collapsed veins; abscesses (swollen tissue with pus); infection of the lining and valves in the heart; constipation and stomach cramps; liver or kidney disease; miscarriage; low birth weight; neonatal abstinence syndrome; risk of HIV; hepatitis; and other infectious diseases from shared needles.

Combination with Alcohol: Dangerous slowdown of heart rate and breathing; coma; and death.

LSD:

Short-Term: Rapid emotional swings; distortion of a person's ability to recognize reality, think rationally, or communicate with others; raised blood pressure, heart rate, body temperature; dizziness; loss of appetite; tremors; enlarged pupils.

Long-Term: Frightening flashbacks (called Hallucinogen Persisting Perception Disorder [HPPD]); ongoing visual disturbances, disorganized thinking, paranoia, and mood swings.

Marijuana (Cannabis):

Short-Term: Enhanced sensory perception and euphoria followed by drowsiness/relaxation; slowed reaction time; problems with balance and coordination; increased heart rate and appetite; problems with learning and memory; anxiety.

Long-Term: Mental health problems, chronic cough, frequent respiratory infections. In rare cases, risk of recurrent episodes of severe nausea and vomiting. In youth, may impair brain development and learning functions. In pregnancy, babies born with problems with attention, memory, and problem solving.

Combination with Alcohol: Increased heart rate, blood pressure; further slowing of mental processing and reaction time.

MDMA (Ecstasy/Molly):

Short-Term: Lowered inhibition; enhanced sensory perception; increased heart rate and blood pressure; muscle tension; nausea; faintness; chills or sweating; sharp rise in body temperature leading to kidney failure or death.

Long-Term: Long-lasting confusion, depression, problems with attention, memory, and sleep; increased anxiety, impulsiveness less interest in sex.

Combination with Alcohol: MDMA decreases some of alcohol's effects. Alcohol can increase plasma concentrations of MDMA, which may increase the risk of neurotoxic effects.

Methamphetamine:

Short-Term: Increased wakefulness and physical activity; decreased appetite; increased breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, temperature; irregular heartbeat.

Long-Term: Anxiety, confusion, insomnia, mood problems, violent behavior, paranoia, hallucinations, delusions, weight loss, severe dental problems (“meth mouth”), intense itching leading to skin sores from scratching. In pregnancy, premature delivery; separation of the placenta from the uterus; low birth weight; lethargy; heart and brain problems. Risk of HIV, hepatitis, and other infectious diseases from shared needles.

Combination with Alcohol: Masks the depressant effect of alcohol, increasing risk of alcohol overdose; may increase blood pressure.

PCP:

Short-Term: Delusions, hallucinations, paranoia, problems thinking, a sense of distance from one’s environment, anxiety.

Low doses: slight increase in breathing rate; increased blood pressure and heart rate; shallow breathing; face redness and sweating; numbness of the hands or feet; problems with movement.

High doses: nausea; vomiting; flicking up and down of the eyes; drooling; loss of balance; dizziness; violence; seizures, coma, and death

Long-Term: Memory loss, problems with speech and thinking, loss of appetite, anxiety. PCP has been linked to self-injury. Risk of HIV, hepatitis, and other infectious diseases from shared needle

Synthetic Cannabinoids:

Short-Term: Increased heart rate; vomiting; agitation; confusion; hallucinations, anxiety, paranoia; increased blood pressure.

Long-Term: Unknown

Synthetic Cathinones (“Bath Salts”):

Short-Term: Increased heart rate and blood pressure; euphoria; increased sociability and sex drive; paranoia, agitation, and hallucinations; violent behavior; sweating; nausea, vomiting; insomnia; irritability; dizziness; depression; panic attacks; reduced motor control; cloudy thinking.

Long-Term: Death; Risk of HIV, hepatitis, and other infectious diseases from shared needles.

Tobacco:

Short-Term: Increased blood pressure, breathing, and heart rate.

Long-Term: Greatly increased risk of cancer, especially lung cancer when smoked and oral cancers when chewed; chronic bronchitis; emphysema; heart disease; leukemia; cataracts; pneumonia. In pregnancy, miscarriage, low birth weight, stillbirth, learning and behavior problems.