

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, voice box, liver, colon, and rectum.
- Weakening of the immune system, increasing the chances of getting sick.
- Learning and memory problems, including dementia and poor school performance.
- Mental health problems, including depression and anxiety.
- Social problems, lost productivity, family problems, job related problems, and unemployment.
- Alcohol use disorders, or alcohol dependence

Substance Abuse Health Risks³

Amphetamines⁴:

Effects on the Mind: prolonged stimulant effects; chronic use can lead to psychosis that resembles schizophrenia (paranoia); picking at the skin; visual hallucinations; violent and erratic behavior.

Effects on the Body: increased blood pressure; increased pulse rates; insomnia; loss of appetite; physical exhaustion.

Overdose Effects: Agitation; increased body temperature; hallucinations; convulsions; and possible death.

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

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

³ <https://www.drugabuse.gov/drug-topics/commonly-used-drugs-charts>

⁴ [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide 2020 Edition](#)

Cocaine:

Effects on the Mind: intense euphoric effect known as “rush”; increased alertness and excitation; restlessness; irritability; and anxiety.

Effects on the Body: increased blood pressure and heart rate, dilated pupils; insomnia; and loss of appetite

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

Depressants⁵:

Effect on the Mind: when used properly they are prescribed to induce sleep; relieve anxiety and muscle spasms; and to prevent seizures. When abused, Depressants can cause amnesia; reduce reaction time; impair mental functioning and judgement; and cause confusion.

Effect on the Body: unwanted effects include slurred speech; loss of motor coordination; weakness; headache; lightheadedness; blurred vision; dizziness; nausea; vomiting; low blood pressure; and slowed breathing.

Barbiturates⁶:

Effect on the Mind: Mild euphoria; lack of restraint; relief of anxiety; and sleepiness.

Effect on the Body: Barbiturates slow down the central nervous system and cause sleepiness.

Overdose Effects: Central nervous system depression; decreased respiration; increased heart rate; decreased blood pressure; decreased urine production; decreased body temperature; coma; and possible death.

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⁶ [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide 2020 Edition](#)

Benzodiazepines⁷:

Effect on the Mind: amnesia; hostility; irritability; and vivid or disturbing dreams.

Effect on the Body: slow down nervous system and may cause sleepiness and relaxed mood.

Overdose Effects: Extreme drowsiness; confusion; impaired coordination; decreased reflexes; respiratory depression; coma; and possible death.

Fentanyl⁸:

Short-Term: relaxation; euphoria; pain relief; sedation; confusion; drowsiness; dizziness; nausea; vomiting; urinary retention; pupillary constriction; respiratory depression.

Overdose Effects: stupor; changes in pupillary size; cold and clammy skin; cyanosis; coma; respiratory failure leading to death.

GHB⁹:

Effect on the Mind: euphoria; drowsiness; decreased anxiety; confusion; memory impairment; visual hallucinations; excited behavior; aggressive behavior.

Effect on the body: nausea; unconsciousness, seizures; slowed heart rate; greatly slowed breathing; lower body temperature; vomiting; coma; death.

Overdose Effects: coma and death.

Combination with Alcohol: Greatly increases the depressant effects of alcohol

Combination with other Depressants: Greatly increases the depressant effects

Withdrawal Symptoms: insomnia; anxiety; tremors; increased heart rate; increased blood pressure; occasional psychotic thought.

Rohypnol¹⁰:

Effects on the Mind: Drowsiness; sleep; decreased anxiety and amnesia of events while under the influence of the substance; increased or decreased reaction time; impaired mental functioning and judgment; confusion; aggression; excitability.

Effects on the Body: slurred speech; loss of motor coordination; weakness; headache; and respiratory depression.

⁷ [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide 2020 Edition](#)

⁸ [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide 2020 Edition](#)

⁹ [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide 2020 Edition](#)

¹⁰ [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide 2020 Edition](#)

Overdose Effects: severe sedation; unconsciousness; slow heart rate; and suppression of respiration that may be sufficient to result in death.

Hallucinogens:

Effect on the Mind: perceptual distortions; psychic effects include distortions of thought associated with time and space.

Effect on the Body: physiological effects include elevated heart rate, increased blood pressure; dilated pupils; and often can induce nausea and vomiting.

Overdose Effects: Respiratory depression; coma; convulsions; seizures; and death due to respiratory arrest.

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; other infectious diseases from shared needles; and addiction.

Overdose Effects¹¹: slow, shallow breathing; blue lips and fingernails; clammy skin; convulsions; coma; and possible death.

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

Hydromorphone¹²:

Effect on the Mind: Euphoria; relaxation; sedation; reduced anxiety; mental clouding; changes in mood; nervousness; restlessness; physiological and psychological dependence.

Effect on the Body: constipation; pupillary constriction; urinary retention; nausea; vomiting; respiratory depression; dizziness; impaired coordination; loss of appetite; rash; slow or rapid heartbeat; changes in blood pressure.

Overdose Effects: severe respiratory depression; drowsiness progressing to stupor or coma; lack of skeletal muscle tone; cold and clammy skin; constricted pupils; reduction in blood pressure and heart rate; severe overdose can result in death.

Khat¹³:

Effects on the Mind: manic behavior; grandiose delusions; paranoia; nightmares; hallucinations; hyperactivity; can result in violence and suicidal depression.

¹¹ [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide 2020 Edition](#)

¹² [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide 2020 Edition](#)

¹³ [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide: 2020 Edition](#)

Effect on the Body: immediate increase in blood pressure and heart rate; brown staining of teeth; insomnia; gastric disorders; chronic abuse can lead to physical exhaustion.

Overdose Effects: delusions; loss of appetite; difficulty with breathing; increase in blood pressure; increase in heart rate.

K2/Spice¹⁴:

Effects on the Mind: acute psychotic episodes; dependence; withdrawal; intense hallucinations; severe agitation; disorganized thoughts; paranoid delusions; violence.

Effects on the Body: tachycardia; elevated blood pressure; unconsciousness; tremors; seizures; vomiting; hallucinations; agitation; anxiety; pallor; numbness; tingling.

Overdose Effects: agitation; anxiety; seizures; stroke; coma; heart attack leading to death; organ failure leading to death; acute kidney injury.

LSD¹⁵:

Effects on the Mind: visual changes; extreme changes in mood; impaired depth and time perception accompanied by distorted perception of the shape and size of objects, movements, colors, sound, touch, and the users own body image.

Effects on the Body: dilated pupils; higher body temperature; increased heart rate and blood pressure; sweating; loss of appetite; sleeplessness; dry mouth; and tremors

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.

¹⁴ [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide: 2020 Edition](#)

¹⁵ [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide: 2020 Edition](#)

MDMA (Ecstasy/Molly):

Short-Term: Lowered inhibition; enhanced sensory perception; increased heart rate and blood pressure; muscle tension; nausea; faintness; tremors; involuntary teeth clenching; muscle cramps; 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.

Overdose Effects:¹⁶ hyperthermia resulting in multiple organ and cardiovascular system failure and death.

Methadone¹⁷:

Effects on the Mind: psychological dependence

Effects on the Body: sweating; itchy skin; sleepiness; once stopped can experience anxiety, muscle tremors, nausea, diarrhea, vomiting and abdominal cramps

Overdose Effects: slow and shallow breathing; blue fingernails and lips; stomach spasms; clammy skin; weak pulse; coma; and possible death.

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.

Overdose Effects:¹⁸ may result in death from stroke; heart attack or multiple organ problems (due to overheating).

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

¹⁶ [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide: 2020 Edition](#)

¹⁷ [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide: 2020 Edition](#)

¹⁸ [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide: 2020 Edition](#)

Morphine¹⁹:

Effects on the Mind: euphoria; relief of pain; tolerance; physical and psychological dependence.

Effects on the Body: relief from physical pain; decrease in hunger; inhibition of the cough reflex.

Overdose Effects: cold and clammy skin; lowered blood pressure; sleepiness; slowed breathing; slow pulse rate; coma; possible death.

Opium²⁰:

Effects on the Mind: euphoric rush; relaxation; relief of physical pain

Effects on the Body: inhibits muscle movement in the bowels; constipation; dry mouth; dry nose; physical and psychological dependence; overdose

Overdose Effects: slow breathing; seizures; dizziness; weakness; loss of consciousness; coma; possible death.

Oxycodone²¹:

Effects on the Mind: euphoria; relaxation.

Effects on the Body: pain relief; sedation; respiratory depression; constipation; papillary constriction; cough suppression; extended use may cause severe liver damage.

Overdose Effects: extreme drowsiness; muscle weakness; confusion; cold and clammy skin; pinpoint pupils; shallow breathing; slow heart rate; fainting; coma; and possible death.

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

¹⁹ [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide: 2020 Edition](#)

²⁰ [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide: 2020 Edition](#)

²¹ [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide: 2020 Edition](#)

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.

Synthetic Opioids²²:

Effects: relaxation; euphoria; pain relief; sedation; confusion; drowsiness; dizziness; nausea; vomiting; urinary retention; pupillary constriction; respiratory depression.

Overdose Effects: stupor; changes in pupillary size; cold and clammy skin; cyanosis; coma; respiratory failure resulting in death.

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.

²² [Drugs of Abuse | A DEA Resource Guide: 2020 Edition](#)