



## COMMONLY MISUSED SUBSTANCES

Alcohol and drug use disorders are complex and include misuse, dependence, or addiction to alcohol and/or legal or illegal drugs. Although each substance carries its own health risks, all have the potential to have a negative impact on the lives of not only the individuals in need of treatment, but also those of their family members.

### Prescription Drugs

- **Basic Facts:** Prescription drugs, when used correctly and under a doctor's supervision, are safe and effective. However, certain prescription drugs, when abused, can alter the brain's activity and lead to dependence and possibly addiction.<sup>1</sup>
- Three types of prescription drugs commonly are misused:
  - *Opioids:* Often called narcotics, opioids such as morphine and codeine are used to treat pain from cancer, terminal illness, severe injury, or surgery.<sup>2</sup> Long-term use of opioids can lead to dependence and uncomfortable withdrawal symptoms when use is reduced or stopped. Withdrawal symptoms include muscle and bone pain, diarrhea, vomiting, cold flashes, and involuntary leg movements.<sup>3</sup> Some common street names for opioids include big O, black stuff, block, gum, and hop.<sup>4</sup> Among youths, they may be called oxy, oxycotton, o.c., coties, percs, vics, ac/dc, demmies, or hillbilly heroin.
  - *Central nervous system (CNS) depressants:* These drugs are useful in treating anxiety and sleep disorders.<sup>5</sup> Withdrawal from CNS depressants can be difficult, even dangerous. Because all CNS depressants work by slowing the brain's activity, when an individual stops taking them, the brain's activity can race out of control, possibly leading to seizures, and in some instances, life-threatening complications.<sup>6</sup> Some common street names for depressants include barbs, phennies, yellow jackets, downers, and tranks.<sup>7</sup>

- *Stimulants*: Used to increase alertness and physical activity, they often are prescribed to treat narcolepsy, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and obesity.<sup>8</sup> Taking high doses of a stimulant can result in an irregular heartbeat, dangerously high body temperatures, cardiovascular failure, or lethal seizures.<sup>9</sup> Some common street names for stimulants include bennies, black beauties, crosses, hearts, uppers, LA turnaround, and truck drivers.<sup>10</sup>
- **Prevalence:**
  - About 2 percent of adults age 26 or older reported current misuse of prescription drugs in 2002. That number climbed to more than 5 percent among people ages 18 to 25.<sup>11</sup>
  - Nearly 30 percent of all drug abuse-related emergency room visits in 2002 involved a prescription benzodiazepine, antidepressant, or analgesic.<sup>12</sup>

## **Tobacco and Alcohol**

- **Basic Facts:**
  - Cigarettes and other forms of tobacco, such as cigars, pipe tobacco, and chewing tobacco, are addictive, and nicotine is the drug in tobacco that causes addiction. Nicotine is both a stimulant and sedative to the central nervous system. It is readily absorbed into the body when tobacco is smoked or chewed.<sup>13</sup>
  - Tobacco use, particularly cigarette smoking, is the leading cause of preventable illness in the United States.<sup>14</sup> Smoking is a major cause of stroke and the third leading cause of death in the United States.<sup>15</sup>
  - Consumption of alcohol can increase the risk for certain cancers, especially those of the liver, esophagus, throat, and larynx (voice box). Heavy drinking can cause liver cirrhosis (scarring), immune system problems, brain damage, and harm to the fetus during pregnancy.<sup>16</sup> High levels of alcohol use are strongly correlated with an increased likelihood of using illicit drugs.<sup>17</sup>
  - Even drinking at moderate levels can affect driving ability, cause medication interactions, alcohol-related birth defects, or long-term health problems.<sup>18</sup>
- **Prevalence:**
  - More than one in four adults and 13 percent of teenagers smoke.<sup>19</sup>
  - Nearly 23 percent of Americans age 12 or older, or about 54 million people, reported binge drinking in the month prior to being surveyed in

2002 (having five or more drinks on the same occasion at least once in the past month).<sup>20</sup>

- About 1 in 7 Americans age 12 or older in 2002 (14.2 percent, or 33.5 million people) drove under the influence of alcohol at least once in the 12 months prior to being interviewed.<sup>21</sup>
- Traffic fatalities in alcohol-related crashes rose slightly to 17,419 in 2002, accounting for 41 percent of the total traffic fatalities for the year.<sup>22</sup>

## **Marijuana**

- **Basic Facts:**

- Marijuana can be addictive and is much stronger than it was 30 years ago. Levels of the main active ingredient in marijuana, THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol), are five times greater than they were in the 1970s.<sup>23</sup>
- Marijuana use has the potential to cause problems in daily life or worsen a person's existing problems. Depression, anxiety, and personality disturbances all are associated with marijuana use.<sup>24</sup> The use of marijuana also can produce adverse mental and behavioral changes, such as impaired short-term memory, verbal skills, judgment, coordination, and balance.<sup>25</sup>
- Common street names for marijuana include blunt, dope, ganja, grass, herb, joints, Mary Jane, pot, reefer, sinsemilla, skunk, and weed.<sup>26</sup>

- **Prevalence:**

- Marijuana is the most commonly used illicit drug in the United States. In 2002, it was used by 75 percent of current illicit drug users.<sup>27</sup>
- More than half of 18- to 25-year-olds have tried marijuana at least once.<sup>28</sup>
- Marijuana was mentioned in 18 percent of all emergency room visits that were induced by or related to drug abuse in 2002.<sup>29</sup>
- An estimated 974,000 persons 12 or older received treatment for marijuana in the past year.<sup>30</sup>

## **Cocaine and "Crack"**

- **Basic Facts:**

- Cocaine is a powerfully addictive stimulant that directly affects the brain. One form of cocaine is a hydrochloric salt or white powder that dissolves in water and can be taken either intravenously or through the nose. The

other form, freebase (crack), is cocaine that has been neutralized by an acid and can be smoked.<sup>31</sup>

- Research has revealed a potentially dangerous interaction between cocaine and alcohol. Mixing the two is the most common two-drug combination that results in drug-related death.<sup>32</sup>
- The medical complications associated with cocaine use include disturbances in heart rhythm and heart attacks, respiratory effects such as chest pain and respiratory failure, and neurological effects such as strokes and headaches.<sup>33</sup>
- Common street names for cocaine include blow, bump, C, candy, Charlie, coke, crack, flake, rock, snow, and toot.<sup>34</sup>
- **Prevalence:**
  - In 2002, an estimated two million people were current cocaine users, 567,000 of whom used crack.<sup>35</sup>
  - Cocaine was mentioned in 30 percent of all emergency room visits that were induced by or related to drug abuse in 2002.<sup>36</sup>

## Hallucinogens

- **Basic Facts:**
  - Hallucinogens, including LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide, also known as acid, blotter, boomers, cubes, microdot, or yellow sunshines), mescaline (also known as buttons, cactus, mesc, or peyote), and psilocybin (also known as magic mushrooms, purple passion, or shrooms), are drugs that disrupt a person's ability to think and communicate rationally and distort their perception of reality.<sup>37</sup>
  - Drugs such as PCP (phencyclidine) and Ketamine, which were initially developed as general anesthetics for surgery, distort perceptions of sight and sound and produce feelings of detachment—dissociation—from the environment and self.<sup>38</sup>
  - In addition to short-term effects on perception and mood, hallucinogens are associated with psychotic-like episodes that can occur long after the person has taken the drug, and can cause respiratory depression, heart rate abnormalities, and a withdrawal syndrome.<sup>39</sup>
- **Prevalence:**
  - About 1.2 million people were current users of hallucinogens in 2002, and 71 percent of hallucinogen users were 12 to 25 years old.<sup>40</sup>

## Heroin

- **Basic Facts:**
  - Heroin is processed from morphine. Recent studies suggest that people are switching from injecting heroin to snorting or smoking it because of the misconception that these forms of use will not lead to addiction.<sup>41</sup>
  - Heroin use is associated with serious health conditions, including fatal overdose, spontaneous abortion, collapsed veins, and infectious diseases including HIV/AIDS and hepatitis.<sup>42</sup>
  - Common street names for heroin include brown sugar, dope, H, horse, junk, skag, skunk, smack, and white horse.<sup>43</sup>
- **Prevalence:**
  - About 166,000 Americans age 12 and older have used heroin in the past month. About 277,000 heroin users were treated in 2002.<sup>44</sup>
  - Heroin was mentioned in 14 percent of all emergency room visits that were induced by or related to a drug in 2002.<sup>45</sup>

## Methamphetamine

- **Basic Facts:**
  - Methamphetamine is a powerfully addictive stimulant that affects the central nervous system. It can be taken orally, by intravenous injection, and by smoking or snorting.<sup>46</sup>
  - Although the drug first was used in selected urban areas, high levels of methamphetamine use are now seen in both urban and rural settings and by very diverse segments of the population.<sup>47</sup>
  - Methamphetamine use can cause strokes, convulsions, anxiety, and irregular heartbeat. Its use can result in cardiovascular collapse or death.<sup>48</sup>
  - Common street names for methamphetamine include chalk, crank, crystal, fire, glass, go fast, ice, meth, and speed.<sup>49</sup> In its smoked form, it is known as ice, crystal, crank, and glass.<sup>50</sup>
- **Prevalence:**
  - Nearly 600,000 Americans age 12 and older have used methamphetamine in the past month.<sup>51</sup>

- Methamphetamine was mentioned in 3 percent of all emergency room visits that were induced by or related to drug abuse in 2002.<sup>52</sup>

### **Ecstasy (also known as MDMA, or methylenedioxyamphetamine)**

- **Basic Facts:**

- A synthetic illicit drug that causes both hallucinogenic and stimulant effects, Ecstasy (MDMA) is most commonly encountered at all-night dance parties (called raves) or at techno parties and nightclubs. MDMA is generally sold as a tablet taken orally.<sup>53</sup>
- Common street names for Ecstasy include Adam, clarity, Eve, lover's speed, peace, STP, X, and XTC.<sup>54</sup>
- Using MDMA can cause confusion, depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, craving for the drug, and paranoia. People who take MDMA also risk dehydration, hyperthermia, and heart or kidney failure if using the drug during physical exertion or in hot environments, ultimately facing the possibility of death. People who have circulatory problems or heart disease face particular risks because MDMA can increase heart rate and blood pressure.<sup>55</sup>

- **Prevalence:**

- Most MDMA users are teenagers and young adults. More than 15 percent of young adults (ages 18 - 25) have tried MDMA at least once, and nearly 6 percent have used the drug in the past year.<sup>56</sup>
- MDMA use decreased among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders in 2003 compared with 2002.<sup>57</sup>

### **Inhalants**

- **Basic Facts:**

- The term "inhalants" refers to more than 1,000 different household and commercial products that can be intentionally misused by inhaling them through the mouth or nose for an intoxicating effect. These products are composed of volatile solvents and substances commonly found in commercial adhesives, lighter fluids, cleaning solutions, and paint products.<sup>58</sup>
- There is a positive correlation between the use of inhalants and problems in school, such as failing grades. Inhalant users also tend to suffer physical consequences ranging from nausea and vomiting to damaged lungs, paralysis, and even death.<sup>59</sup>

- Common street names for inhalants include laughing gas, poppers, snappers, and whippets.<sup>60</sup>
- **Prevalence:**
  - In 2002, more than 15 percent of young adults (ages 18-25) and more than 10 percent of youths (ages 12-17) had ever used an inhalant.
  - Most new inhalant users are under the age of 18.<sup>61</sup>

## **Anabolic Steroids**

- **Basic Facts:**
  - Anabolic steroids are synthetic derivatives of the male hormone testosterone. They promote the growth of skeletal muscle and increase lean body mass.<sup>62</sup>
  - Steroids can be taken orally or via injection with a needle. Some consequences of steroid use are increased risk of heart attacks and strokes, liver problems, stunted growth, infertility, and testicular shrinkage. Steroids also may increase irritability and aggression.<sup>63</sup>
  - Common street names for anabolic steroids include roids and juice.<sup>64</sup>
- **Prevalence:**
  - It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of people age 18 or older misuse steroids at least once a year.<sup>65</sup>
  - High school seniors who had ever used steroids in their lifetimes increased from 2.5 percent in 2000 to 4 percent in 2002.<sup>66</sup>

To learn more about alcohol and drug use disorders, treatment, and usage rates, you can access many of the materials cited in this fact sheet by visiting the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) Web site at [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov) or by contacting an information specialist at SAMHSA's National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI) toll-free at 1-800-729-6686 or 301-468-2600. You also can access the Clearinghouse at [www.ncadi.gov](http://www.ncadi.gov).

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