

Keeping Kids Safe

A GUIDE TO DRUG AND ALCOHOL PREVENTION



What Is Red Ribbon Week?

Held annually in late October since the '80s, Red Ribbon Week began as a tribute to a single fallen DEA agent before becoming something much larger.

RIBBONS

The first National Red Ribbon Week was organized in 1988 by the National Family Partnership, after an official proclamation from Congress. President Ronald Reagan and first lady Nancy Reagan served as the first honorary co-chairs. Today, tens of millions of students and adults join in activities to ensure that Red Ribbon Week is both a lasting dedication to DEA agent Enrique “Kiki” Camarena’s memory and an opportunity to discuss the dangers presented to young people by drugs.

BEGINNINGS

Friends and neighbors initially began wearing red ribbons in 1985 to commemorate the sacrifice of Camarena, an undercover agent who was brutally murdered after uncovering a multi-million dollar marijuana operation in Chihuahua, Mexico. A friend began the ribbon campaign in Camarena’s California hometown, and it soon came to symbolize a commitment to raising awareness about the destruction associat-



LANCE CPL. OWEN KIMBREL/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

ed with drugs. The campaign spread across the state, and then eventually became part of a broader nationwide effort.

THEME

This year’s Red Ribbon Week theme — “Celebrate Life. Live Drug Free.” — was created by a trio of seventh-graders at New York’s Wayland-Cohocton Middle School named Chelsea

Abbott, Emily King and Celise Wicker. The theme is a reminder, according to RedRibbon.org, “that everyday Americans across the country make significant daily contributions to their communities by being the best they can be because they live drug free.”

PLEDGES

Every Red Ribbon Week has

its own annual theme, but one element remains from year to year: pledges meant to reinforce the event’s core values. They’re aimed at both parents and students, and can also be found at RedRibbon.org. Parents promise to “talk to our children and the children in our lives about the dangers of drug abuse,” while making clear rules, setting a good

example, monitoring their behavior and enforcing appropriate consequences.

Here’s the youth pledge: “I pledge to grow up safe, healthy and drug free by understanding the dangers of drug use and abuse, respecting myself and being drug free, and spreading the word to family and friends about the importance of being healthy and drug free.”

Spot the Warning Signs

Here's how to tell the difference between a bad day and something more worrisome.

Teenagers can be prone to emotional swings, as heightened tensions over friends or school become commonplace. They may also become mentally or physically exhausted as their responsibility levels ramp up into young adulthood. If these changes become more pronounced or last too long, however, they may be indicative of more serious issues. There are also other important warning signs to look out for along the way.

WARNING SIGNS

More than 10 million American teens and young adults are struggling today with alcohol or drugs. D.A.R.E. and the Partnership to End Addiction say the following warning signs may indicate alcohol or drug usage: Lasting changes in their sleep patterns, slurred speech, lingering bloodshot eyes, unexplained skin abrasions or injuries, and any dramatic changes in weight. Many who begin using drugs show a particular lack of interest in personal hygiene or their personal appearance. Watch for burned or sooty fingers, and needle marks on arms and legs.

SUBTLE CHANGES

Sometimes, alcohol and

drug abuse is more difficult to confirm, but might be indicated by other less obvious signs including: loss of interest in favorite activities like sports, hanging out with friends or hobbies, emotional instability, a sudden secretiveness, lying about their whereabouts, aggression or depression, and a noticeable decline in their grades. Be on the look out for

unusual smells, peer-group changes, or efforts to cover up bad breath, nasal irritation or red eyes with over-the-counter treatments. Keep a close eye on prescription medicine and any alcohol kept in the home.

WHAT TO DO

If you recognize important changes like these, the Partnership to End Addiction

recommends discussing a potential issue with drug and alcohol directly with teens. Ask if they've been offered drugs, and how they responded. If they answered yes, make direct inquiries about how they've been interacting with these illegal substances — then be prepared with a supportive message about how you will get through this

issue as a family. Remind your child that you only want what is best for their future, and that starts with getting sober again. The Partnership to End Addiction — which changed its name from Partnership for Drug-Free Kids after merging with the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse — also provides a helpline at 855-378-4373.



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Addiction and the Teen Brain

The problem with our response to drugs and alcohol isn't just that it mimics how we respond to everyday activities like running or enjoying ice cream.

Abusers also find that addiction requires more and more to achieve the same highs, putting them on a very dangerous path.

THE SCIENCE

The brain's reward system reinforces various behaviors that we need to survive, like eating. When you have a good meal, a chemical called dopamine is released which provides you with a jolt of satisfaction. In this way, we are subtly encouraged to eat again. The problem is, the brain works exactly the same way with drugs — except the stakes are much higher. If you eat too much, other negative health outcomes may arise; drug use is the same way, except that an overdose can kill someone at any time. At the same time, your brain's circuits are constantly adapting to new stimuli, and they eventually become less sensitive to things like dopamine. As a tolerance to drugs and alcohol increases, more and more is required to generate those initial feelings. Breaking this cycle is critical to overcoming addiction.



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PERSONAL IMPACTS

Those who suffer from anxiety or depression are more prone to addiction, according to the National Institute for Drug Abuse. Often, they get involved with these substances as a form of self-medication. Unfortunately, drug use can make mental health issues far worse. Some people are

genetically predisposed to addiction, the institute notes. At the same time, familial drug use puts children in an adverse situation that can impact their emotional growth. Kids who live with addicted parents or older relatives can be more prone to developing a drug problem later.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

If you are battling addiction, or recognize a hereditary problem with substance abuse, discuss it with your doctor, a counselor or a support group. Emerging from addiction will take time, but more than that, you'll need to develop a group of advocates, friends and family to help you

remain on the right path. Learn to recognize your own triggers, whether it's certain situations or people, stress or specific memories — and work to avoid them.

Lean on professional health-care providers whose vast experience can help shape your journey toward healing.



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How to Talk to Kids

Teens who have regular conversations with their parents about abuse and addiction are more than 40% less likely to use drugs, according to one survey.

Yet just one-fourth of them report ever having these critical discussions, according to the National Family Partnership.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Teen use of drugs before their brains are fully matured can cause permanent damage in two ways. First, it may stunt important developmental growth. Early drug use

may also dramatically increase their risk of eventually becoming addicted to drugs and alcohol, according to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence. Those who begin drinking before age 15 are some five times more likely to develop addictive tendencies down the road than those who wait until the legal age. Talking about this crucial sub-

ject early and often can have very real impacts. If you're not comfortable getting started, seek out community programs or support groups where these discussions are already being held in a safe, welcoming environment. That may help spark a needed conversation.

ABOUT DRUGS

Discuss common risk factors with your teen, including family history, behavioral or mental-health conditions like anxiety, depression or attention deficit disorders, a history of trauma, low self-esteem or other issues with social

skills and peer pressure. Teens who use are more likely to develop a future drug dependence. But in the meantime, they're also at risk of a wide range of health issues. Liver damage and heart failure have been associated with ecstasy, while lung and kidney failure can follow use of inhalants. Chronic use of methamphetamines could lead to psychotic behaviors.

ABOUT ALCOHOL

As with drugs, impaired drivers risk getting into a car accident because of slowed judgment and reaction times. Your teen may not know that

alcohol-related accidents are now the No. 1 cause of death among those 15-to-24 years old. Half of youth drownings, homicides and suicides are alcohol related. Upper-class high school students account for a shocking percentage of alcohol consumption, according to D.A.R.E.-provided data, while binge drinking has been reported beginning in the eighth grade.

At the same time, one survey by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services showed that some 2.5 million high-school seniors were unaware of the risks of alcohol poisoning.

Recognizing Gateway Drugs

In some cases, a handful of drugs that teens think of as less dangerous can lead to a lifetime of abuse and dependency. Here's how it can happen.

Using so-called “gateway drugs” doesn't guarantee that someone will one day trade up for more dangerous things like cocaine, methamphetamines, fentanyl or heroin. In fact, research shows that it doesn't in the vast majority of cases. Different people are triggered by a mixture of genetics, family history and personality. Still, those who use hard drugs will often describe a journey toward their addiction which begins in some everyday places.

The most common gateway drugs are the easiest to get for those teens looking to experiment, including alcohol, tobacco and marijuana. Any one of them can open the door for crippling addictive habits for teens whose central nervous systems are still developing. Together, they can also work as a ladder to more serious illegal substances.

TOBACCO

Tobacco is typically the first drug tried by teens who end up addicted to illegal substances, in a sequence of usage that the U.S. Department of Education says moves to alcohol, then to mar-



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ijuana and finally to harder drugs. Addiction only deepens the earlier someone starts smoking, according to both the U.S. Center for Disease Control and the Department of Education. Becoming addicted to nicotine can also work as a dress rehearsal for more damaging behaviors later on.

ALCOHOL

Research shows that some 90% of teens have experimented with alcohol by the time they graduate from high school. Social pressures lead many to lean on alcohol as a coping mechanism to deal with anxiety, but the dangers — even for the young and healthy — are very real. Teen drinkers may be

stunting their brain development, while finding themselves struggling with impulse control and decision making. They are also putting themselves at risk of dependency.

MARIJUANA

The National Institute on Drug Abuse states that cannabinoids may decrease our brain's

reaction to dopamine over time, making it harder to experience the same highs into adulthood. At some point, users may look for something stronger to fill the gap. That's why various epidemiological studies have reported that chronic marijuana use can increase certain users' vulnerability to harder drugs.

Prescription Drug Dangers

Illegal substances aren't the only dangerous risk to teens. In fact, prescription drugs are typically more accessible to teens who are thinking about experimenting — since they can be found inside medicine cabinets in their own homes.

More than 3,000 children begin experimenting with prescription drugs on any given day, according to the National Family Partnership. Some 70% of young people who admit abusing pain meds say they got them from family or friends. Here's how to protect young people from this typically overlooked danger.

INSIDE THE NUMBERS

The most commonly abused substances by Americans who are 14 and older remain marijuana and alcohol, according to the National Institute of Drug Abuse. But prescription drugs are third. Users may simply be interested in getting high, but not always. Some begin looking to alleviate everyday pain, or with a misguided idea that certain substances help them focus, before ultimately becoming addicted.

One survey found that near-

ly a quarter of responding teens admitted to taking a drug that had not been prescribed to them. Many believe that prescription drugs are safer or even less addictive than drugs purchased on the street. Take time to educate children on how the process works, as doctors evaluate individual patients before prescribing specific medicines to address health problems —

while also taking into account individual risk factors with regard to adverse reactions and interactions with other drugs.

Taking someone else's medicine can have serious, and sometimes fatal consequences. To learn more about this growing problem visit the National Institute of Drug Abuse's website, which boasts a vast amount of information

for parents, teachers and young people.

KEEPING THEM SAFE

If possible, keep all prescription drugs stored away where teen access is either not possible or tightly controlled. Still, any lock can be broken. So, it's also best to keep a constantly updated inventory of medications by counting them every day. This is particularly import-

ant with drugs which are commonly abused by teens, including stimulants, pain relievers and sedatives. It's important to talk to children about the risks of drug abuse and of taking pills without a prescription. But that doesn't replace the security found in regularly checking to make sure that no pills are missing from the medicine cabinet. Disposal of outdated medication also hinders easy access.



Drug Use Fast Facts

Frank talks with teens can begin with conversation starters.

Here are some notable drug-use statistics, historical notes from over the years, and more information on how to get help for anyone struggling with abuse and addiction.

MOST USED

Alcohol is sold everywhere in America, but it is still one of the most addictive drugs available. It's also our most-used drug, by a wide margin.

Here's the breakdown, according to the National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics:

Alcohol: 139.8 million people

Tobacco: 58.8 million people

Marijuana: 2.9 million people

Prescription stimulants: 2.9 million people

Methamphetamines: 2.2 million people

Prescription painkillers: 1.9 million people

Heroin: 957,000 people

Cocaine: 638,000 people

Prescription sedatives: 319,000 people

MOST DANGEROUS

Prescription drugs actually kill more people than illegal substances like fentanyl, meth and heroin — typically because they're far easier to access. Tens of thousands die every year while taking drugs that are perfectly legal with a doctor's note.



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ONCE LEGAL

In the past, anyone could buy heroin and a form of cocaine. Heroin, a powerful sedative, was once marketed as a cough suppressant by the Bayer pharmaceutical company. The problem: It's also one of the most addictive of all drugs. Similarly, coca leaves — which were valued for their ability to suppress pain, thirst, hunger and fatigue — found a home in an early recipe for Coca-Cola. Today, these usag-

es are rightly banned in the U.S.

OVERDOSE DEATHS

Drug overdose deaths rose from 2019 to 2020 in the latest figures available, as nearly 92,000 Americans passed away after ingesting illicit and prescription drugs.

Deaths involving fentanyl and other synthetic opioids also continued to use, with around 57,000 deaths in 2020 according to the Centers for

Disease Control.

OLDER USERS

While much of the focus over the last few decades has been on trying to educate youths about its dangers, drug use is on the rise among the aging American population. Admissions for treatment of heroin and marijuana abuse among those older than 50 has more than doubled in the last decade. The National Institute on Drug Abuse has chalked

this up to former members of the counterculture movement who never kicked these harmful habits.

HELPLINE

Need help with a drug problem? The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration offers a free confidential helpline with treatment referrals and information in both English and Spanish for individuals and families at 800-662-HELP.