

FOUR PROGRESSIVE STAGES OF TEENAGE CHEMICAL DEPENDENCY

How do adolescents go from Little League baseball to Big League drugs? It doesn't happen overnight. **The process is progressive and predictable.** Some people spend more time in one stage than others. Some users quit – usually in one of the first stages. Details in each stage can vary, but **the progressive aspect is an absolute.** Few people ever start out wanting to be an addict. As a teen goes from “no use” to “experimentation” to “occasional use” to “regular use” to “dependency” to “catastrophe” or death, the teen usually goes through four different stages:

STAGE 1

- Usually begins saying “NO” about age 11 or 12, with little difficulty.
- Says “NO” several more times, with more difficulty.
- Tries a drug **just once** to fit in. Almost always the drug is alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, or an inhalant.
- Source of supply is almost always a sibling, friend, or parents' supply.
- Uses only on weekends, only occasionally.
- When drug wears off, returns to normal.
- Sees no harm.
- PARENTS RARELY KNOW.**
- Maintains appearance, grades, and all interests.
- Feels he/she can “take it or leave it.”
- Uses only with others.

STAGE 2

- Friends still supply, but child now buys own too.
- Occasionally tries pills or other “new” drugs—usually whatever is available.
- Periodically uses at home.
- The “highs” are higher.
- Some depression when coming down from high.
- Actively seeks out drugs.
- Use goes to almost every weekend.
- Takes Rx drugs and alcohol from family supply. Steals to buy drugs.
- Tries hard to keep normal appearance in front of parents, teachers, and coaches.
- PARENTS SUSPECT SOMETHING.** Cons and lies proliferate.
- Uses drugs to self-medicate.
- Mood swings begin with aggressive behavior and occasional “explosions.”

STAGE 3

- Getting high becomes one of the most important things in life.
- Uses almost every day.
- Adds LSD, cocaine, meth, or other available drugs to those already being taken.
- Gets high alone more often than with friends.
- Takes more drugs to get the same high as before.

- ☒ First overdose usually occurs. Experiences blackouts.
- ☒ Trouble in school or with police.
- ☒ Associates only with druggie friends. Stops pretending to be “straight.”
- ☒ Angry scenes with family.
- ☒ Skips school, drops outside interests.
- ☒ “Druggie” appearance.
- ☒ Steals more to finance drugs.

STAGE 4

- ☒ Uses drugs just to exist.
- ☒ Uses drugs just to feel normal.
- ☒ Uses ALL the time.
- ☒ “Shoots up” many types of drugs now.
- ☒ Cannot stop use.
- ☒ Has “zombie” look.
- ☒ Experiences weight loss, memory loss.
- ☒ Criminal behavior.
 - ✦ Prostitution.
 - ✦ Major crimes.
- ☒ Death becomes almost inevitable.
 - ✦ Adolescents
 - ✓ trauma incidents, accidents
 - ✓ suicides
 - ✓ murder
 - ✓ overdoses
 - ✦ Young adult
 - ✓ cardiac arrest
 - ✓ kidney failure
 - ✓ liver failure
 - ✓ stroke
 - ✓ respiratory failure

Parents and other gatekeepers need to support and enforce a **NO USE** policy regarding the child’s drug use. During Stage 2, the child begins to lose the ability to stop using drugs on his own. Professional help is often needed. Prevention of all drug problems means stopping the use of any drug by any child before it begins.

Trying drugs just once is not only unsafe; it is the most significant step in the whole dependency process.

~ Adapted from authors Miller Newton, PhD., Ian MacDonald, M.D., and Robert L, DuPont, Jr., M.D.

