

# FOUR PROGRESSIVE STAGES OF TEENAGE CHEMICAL DEPENDENCY

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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 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.
- ☒ 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

During Stage 2, the child begins to lose the ability to stop using drugs on his own. Parents and other gatekeepers need to support and enforce a **NO USE** policy regarding the child’s drug use. 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.

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