

What You Need to Know About Youth & Polysubstance Use

WHAT IS POLYSUBSTANCE USE ?

Polysubstance or polydrug use is defined as the use of more than one substance or type of substance by an individual – consumed at the same time or sequentially (i.e., one after another).¹ This can include the use of alcohol, tobacco products, prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications, marijuana or other federally illicit drugs such as cocaine or ecstasy. Polysubstance use is more common among youth than adults. Initiation of polysubstance use, even on a limited basis during youth, confers an increased risk of expanded polysubstance use in early adulthood.²

WHY ARE MULTIPLE SUBSTANCES USED?

Reasons for polysubstance use may include to enhance the effects of a substance,³ to compensate for undesired effects of a substance,³ to compensate for or cope with negative mood⁵ or behavioral health conditions, or as part of a trajectory of experimentation with substances.⁶⁻⁷ Some individuals may inadvertently consume substances that they do not realize can interact with medications they are taking (for example, using alcohol can impact antidepressants, and using nicotine can increase adverse effects from birth control). Polysubstance use increases the potential for negative effects from each substance.

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON PATTERNS OF POLYSUBSTANCE USE?

Individuals who use certain drugs, like cocaine, amphetamine, opioids or alcohol, may have a higher prevalence of other drug use.⁶ For example, one

study found that reported prescription drug misuse was 18 times higher in people who had an alcohol use disorder.⁸ Common patterns of polysubstance use for youth include using both alcohol and tobacco, alcohol and marijuana, or tobacco and marijuana.⁹

WHAT ARE THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH POLYSUBSTANCE USE?

Having a history of polysubstance use has been found to be associated with greater unmet physical and mental health care needs, and increased risk behaviors, violence and mortality compared to those only using a single substance.⁷ In particular, polysubstance use can increase the risk of:⁷

- Being extremely intoxicated.
- Engaging in risky behaviors (such as impaired driving or unprotected sex).
- Accidents and other injuries.
- Violence perpetration and victimization.
- Developing a substance use disorder for one or more substances.
- Mental health challenges, including depression, paranoia, psychosis and suicide.
- Other serious medical problems such as respiratory failure, liver damage and failure, seizures, heart problems and impacts on the brain.
- Overdose and death.

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