

# 8 Tips for Talking to Your Teen About Alcohol and Other Drugs



**When we tell our teens to put on a seatbelt, it's not because we're expecting an accident – but because we want them to be prepared in case there is one. In the same way, it is important to talk to teens early and often about how to reduce risks when alcohol and other drugs are present.**

While we all hope our teens will refuse alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs, the truth is that some teens will try them and often in places where they can't get help from adults. According to Dr. Patt Denning, "The thing that's most important for parents to know is that harm comes from ignoring, or not preparing, for risk. Risk-taking does not have to be harmful in itself." Prepare your teen to make safer choices by talking to them now about what they can do when alcohol and other drugs are around.

**1 Give teens more advice than "just say no."** Sometimes "just saying no" doesn't feel like an option – even to kids who don't want to try alcohol or other drugs. Help your teen think of other ways to refuse offered substances, such as: "I don't like the taste of alcohol," "I have to get up early," or "My parents wait up for me to see what state I'm in."

**2 Encourage healthy habits and self-awareness.** Did you know that some drug-related hospitalizations and fatalities are due to people simply neglecting to take care of basic physical needs, rather than the drugs themselves? Drug use can make it easy to forget things like staying hydrated, eating healthily, and getting enough sleep. It's also important for teens to know their unique bodies and minds -- if your teen has a medical condition or allergy, or is on medication, help them learn about the specific repercussions that drug use may have.

**3 Talk to teens about drug dosage and release time.** Just like Tylenol doesn't stop headaches immediately, every drug works on a different schedule. Just because someone is not showing symptoms of being high now doesn't mean what they've taken won't kick in later. For this reason:

3a. Tell teens to never drive after drinking or taking drugs, or ride with anyone who has. Make this a non-negotiable rule and be prepared to offer your teen a non-judgmental ride home if needed.

*Continued next page*

3b. Tell teens to take it slow. Because drugs can take time to kick in, teens should go slow if they drink (by alternating alcoholic drinks with water or another non-alcoholic beverage) or use drugs (wait at least ninety minutes to see the effects). “A good rule of thumb to reduce the risks of alcohol and other drug use is keep the dose low, and take it slow, until you know,” says Dr. Denning. This will help reduce the risk of overdose.

**4 Help teens understand the dangers of mixing drugs.** According to Dr. Denning, “The more different drugs you put into your body at the same time the more likely you are to get into trouble.” Mixing substances can sometimes produce a different, and/or more powerful effect than you’d expect. Most opioid-related overdoses, for example, involve at least one other drug (like alcohol or benzodiazepines, which dramatically increase the risk of fatal respiratory depression when mixed with opioids). So remember, when it comes to mixing alcohol and other drugs,  $2 + 2 = 5!$

**5 Explain to teens that they won’t always know the contents of something they’re given.** So it’s important never to leave a drink unattended or take one from someone they don’t know. Similarly, many illicit drugs can be cut with other substances. A drug checking kit can give a better idea of what’s in something, but is not always completely reliable.

**6 Discuss prescription drugs.** These drugs are not necessarily “safer,” and should only be taken according to a doctor’s orders -- and only by the person they are prescribed to. Why? Everyone reacts to substances differently, and someone’s prescribed dose may have been calibrated based on a tolerance they have built up, or a certain chemical imbalance they have. As with illegal drugs, teens using prescription drugs should pay careful attention to dosage and the time it takes the substance to take effect.

**7 Talk to your teen about drugs and sex.** Explain to your teen that alcohol and other drugs can cloud people’s judgment about sex. It can make people unsure if they want to say yes – or if their partner is consenting. It also increases the chances that teens will have unprotected sex, putting them at risk for STIs/STDs and pregnancy. Helping teens gain access to condoms and other forms of birth control, and educating them about the importance of consent are ways of increasing safety.

**8 Encourage your teen to use the buddy system.** Teens should never abandon intoxicated friends, let them wander away, or let them pass out on their back. Help your teen prepare a plan in the case of an emergency, like alcohol poisoning or overdose. Learn about your state’s Good Samaritan law, which can protect people from legal repercussions of drug possession when they call 911 to report an overdose. <http://www.drugpolicy.org/911-good-samaritan-fatal-overdose-prevention-law>

This tip sheet was reviewed by psychiatrist and author Julie Holland, MD. Harm reduction expert Patt Denning, Ph.D. contributed tips.