Substances Overview

Information about common substances, what they do to the body, common short term effects, and key harm minimisation tips for conversations.

Source: (Matua Raki, 2017, P 12-16)

Substance	What is it?	What does it do to the body?	Common short term effects			Key harm minimisation tips for conversations
			Unpleasant effects	Pleasant effects	Signs of recent use	
DEPRESSANTS - SLOW DOWN BODY FUNCTIONS						
Alcohol (taken orally) 	Ethanol or ethyl alcohol are formed when yeast ferments sugars.	When consumed, alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream through the stomach (about 20%) and small intestine (about 80%). Food makes this slower and steadier. It works on gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) receptors in the brain before being broken down by the liver. Each standard drink takes at least an hour to be broken down. Over time alcohol can cause damage to many parts of the body including: the nervous system, brain, heart, lungs, liver and pancreas.	Flushed More emotional Un-coordinated Memory loss Impaired judgment and coordination Nausea, vomiting	Energetic, talkative More confident	Alcohol smell Overfriendly Repetitive conversation Flushed skin Reactive behaviour Disinhibited Slurred speech Poor coordination	Eat before drinking. Count the standard drinks. Avoid drinking while pregnant. Compared to adults, young people's bodies do not show as as many indicators physical indicators of alcohol intoxication. If a young person is slurring, unbalanced or passing out they are much drunker than an adult doing the same - monitor and get support. Don't drink and drive.
Cannabis (smoked or taken orally) 	Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) comes from the cannabis sativa plant.	When smoked, THC is absorbed into the bloodstream through the lungs and taken to the brain where it works on cannabinoid receptors. THC mixes with fat cells in the body to form metabolites. These can be detected in urine weeks afterwards. Over time cannabis can cause cancers of the respiratory system, and may lower motivation and concentration. Young people experience greater long term impacts than adults.	Increased appetite Blood-shot eyes Impaired judgement and coordination Slowed perception of time Drowsiness Paranoia	Relaxation Laughter	Cannabis smell Very relaxed Red or heavy lidded eyes Finding things funny Increased appetite Talkative Distorted sense of time Difficulty focusing	Smoking a lot of cannabis can affect your health. Using cannabis while your brain is developing can cause problems. Stop if you start to feel unwell or uncomfortable. Don't smoke and drive.
Synthetic cannabis (smoked or taken orally) 	Chemicals created to copy how THC acts on the brain.	When smoked, these chemicals are absorbed into the bloodstream through the lungs and taken to the brain where they work on cannabinoid receptors. While similar in structure, they are different to cannabis. Some bind stronger to the receptors than cannabis and cause different effects.	Disorientation Head rush Anxiety Impaired judgement and coordination Nausea Vomiting	Relaxation	Signs vary a lot and can include: Disorientation Distorted sense of time Difficulty focusing Paranoia Poor coordination	The amount of chemicals can differ between packets. We do not know the long term effects. Using synthetic cannabis while your brain is developing can cause problems. Stop if you start to feel unwell or uncomfortable. Don't smoke and drive.
Volatile substances (inhaled, smoked or taken orally) 	Substances produced from organic chemicals.	When inhaled these chemicals are rapidly absorbed by the body and taken to the brain. They act in different ways, some causing acute poisoning. The effect is very short (around 1 minute) with a much longer lasting comedown.	Headache Nausea Loss of coordination Death Agitation of the mouth and nose	Relaxation	Strong smell of the substance Drowsy Stumbling and loss of balance Very similar appearance to high intoxication from alcohol	There is no safe level for inhaling solvents or volatile substances. They are highly flammable. The unpleasant come down lasts much longer than the feeling while inhaling.
Benzodiazepines (taken orally, snorted or injected) 	Medications that are prescribed for depression, anxiety and difficulty sleeping.	These prescription medications act on the central nervous system, usually making people feel more confident, with less anxiety and better moods. For some people, they have the opposite effect - more anxiety and nightmares. When prescribed, a health professional monitors and changes doses to suit the person as the effects (and side effects) can differ from person to person. A person can become dependent on these drugs within a few weeks. Prescriptions are usually for small amounts with advice not to mix with alcohol or other medication.	Agitation Anxiety Difficulty remembering things Drowsiness	More confident Mellow feeling Release of anxiety	Drowsiness Headache Confusion Unsteady gait Dazed look Repetitive eye movements	Don't mix with alcohol or other medications, as it greatly increases the risk of overdose and death. If you feel like you need to take them more and more, you need to seek medical support. Withdrawal can be long and difficult after regular use.
STIMULANTS - SPEED UP / STIMULATE BODY FUNCTIONS						
Benzylpiperazine (BZP) (taken orally or snorted) 	Manufactured chemical that used to be sold as party pills and is now illegal in New Zealand.	BZP increases the activity of dopamine and serotonin in the brain (releasing more and preventing it from being taken back in so it keeps activating brain receptors) and has a stimulant effect.	Agitation Anxiety Vomiting Headache Insomnia Lack of appetite	Euphoric Energetic	Restless Lethargy Anxiety Headache Vomiting Sweating Confusion Irritability Mood swings	Keep within the guidelines on the packet (if stated). It takes time for the effects to be felt. Do not mix with other substances.
Ecstasy/MDMA (taken orally or snorted) 	MDMA is the active ingredient in ecstasy. In New Zealand there are likely to be additional and unknown chemicals in a pill/dose of ecstasy.	Within 30-45 minutes of taking MDMA, the brain releases more serotonin and dopamine, usually making the person feel happier. When the effect of MDMA wears off, the natural pool of these chemicals is depleted and people commonly have a come down and can feel low. Frequent use can cause memory issues, difficulty sleeping and paranoia. Heavy or frequent use can damage the heart and cause cognitive impairment. Substances sold as ecstasy in New Zealand are often not pure MDMA, and can be a mix of MDMA or caffeine along with inactive ingredients. Sometimes they are completely different substances like para-Methoxyamphetamine (PMA) which is much more potent.	Dehydration Decreased appetite Disorientation Feeling hot Teeth grinding Rapid heartbeat Come down and feeling low	Increased mood Euphoric Energetic Feeling closer to other people Mild hallucination Enhanced sensation	Restless Fatigue Loss of appetite Very low mood Trouble concentrating	Drink water regularly (if dancing, drink more to keep hydrated and take breaks to cool down). Avoid using alcohol at the same time as it dehydrates you further. It takes an hour for the effects to happen. Wait for the effects to see how strong it is before deciding whether or not to take more. Use a drug checking service if it is available. MDMA in New Zealand is not usually pure.
Methamphetamine (smoked (pipe) or injected) 	Manufactured chemical that is chemically similar to amphetamine.	Methamphetamine very quickly increases the release of dopamine in the brain where it acts to create feelings of pleasure. These are short lived and usually followed by more unpleasant feelings. Dopamine is part of the brain's reward system, and is why methamphetamine can be quickly addictive.	Agitation Paranoia Seeing, hearing or feeling things that other people don't Seizures Mood swings	For a short time: Increased mood Alert Highly concentrated Increased sexual drive	Enlarged pupils Increased energy No appetite Hyperactive Very talkative Can be aggressive	Take a break from using to give your body a chance to recover. Eat and sleep well during that time. If injecting make sure to use sterile equipment and not share needles. Practice safe sex.
HALLUCINOGENS - DISTORT PERCEPTIONS OF REALITY						
Psilocybin mushrooms (taken orally) 	A plant that is commonly referred to as magic mushrooms	Psilocybin is the active ingredient that causes mind-altering effects when consumed. Most harm is from injury while having senses distorted and it is difficult to know the chemical in each mushroom. This, coupled with the distortion of senses, increases the risk of injury.. It takes an hour for effects to be felt and taking too much (overdose) to try feel an effect is possible in that time. Tolerance builds up extremely quickly.	Nausea Anxiety Disorientation Hallucination Paranoia	Distorted perception Quickly changing emotions	Lethargy and sleepiness Anxiety Paranoia Nausea Quickly changing emotions Hallucinations	Have someone sober to be able to help out if your trip goes bad. Use a small amount initially to see how strong it is. Make sure you are in a safe environment and not near water, roads or cliffs. Make sure they are not confused with similar looking poisonous mushrooms
LSD (taken orally)	Manufactured chemical (lysergic acid diethylamide) that is also referred to as 'acid'	LSD works on the serotonin system in the brain within 20 to 60 minutes of taking it. The part of the brain it impacts on changes the way that a person perceives things and their place in the world. It can change what people see, hear or feel and can last up to 12 hours.	Feeling on 'edge' Muscle tension Sweating Feeling sick Disorientation Loss of emotional control Unwanted spiritual experiences and revelations. Looping thoughts and out of control thinking.	Sensory enhancement Quickly changing emotions Spiritual experiences and revelations.	Lethargy and sleepiness Anxiety Paranoia Low mood Quickly changing emotions Hallucinations	Have someone sober to be able to help out if your trip goes bad. Use a small amount initially to see how strong it is. Make sure you are in a safe environment and not near water, roads, or cliffs. Less is usually better. Taking more increases the risk of unpleasant effects. Ehrlich's reagent can reliably distinguish between LSD and N-BOMe.

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