

Medical problem? Call 1800 022 222. If you need urgent medical help, call triple zero immediately

healthdirect Australia is a free service where you can talk to a nurse or doctor who can help you know what to do.

How to help someone who is misusing drugs or alcohol

12-minute read



If someone has taken drugs or alcohol and may cause harm to themselves or others, or is very unwell, call triple zero (000) and ask for an ambulance.

Key facts

- Drug and alcohol use is common in Australia, with 1 in 3 people reporting they drink alcohol at risky levels, for example.
- If you are concerned that a friend or family member is being impacted by drugs or alcohol, let them know and offer support.
- Avoid being judgemental or accusatory when discussing a person's drug or alcohol use.
- There are many services that help people with drug or alcohol problems — as well as the friends and relatives supporting them.
- It's the person's decision whether they seek help for drug or alcohol misuse, but your support is still invaluable.

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What is drug or alcohol misuse?

Drugs are substances that affect how the body functions. **Illegal drugs** — such as **ecstasy** and **heroin** — can be harmful and unpredictable. Unlike prescription medicines, there is no government organisation that regulates the quality or amount of active ingredients in illegal substances.

However, not all drugs are illegal. **Alcohol** is a legal drug that can be harmful if taken in large amounts or for a long time. **Medicines** that have been prescribed by a doctor can also be harmful if they aren't taken as directed or are taken for non-medical reasons.



Top

Drug and alcohol misuse isn't necessarily related to how often — or in what quantity — a person uses drugs, but the impact their drug use has on their life. Drug or alcohol use can become a problem when it starts to affect a person's judgement, relationships or general health and wellbeing. It can cause them to neglect other responsibilities such as school, work or family.

Drug and alcohol misuse is common. About 1 in 3 people in Australia drink alcohol at [risky levels](#). Two in every 5 people in Australia have used an illegal drug at some point in their lives, including taking pharmaceutical medicines for non-medical purposes.

How do I know if someone needs help for their drug or alcohol use?

It can be difficult to tell if a person is consuming harmful levels of drugs or alcohol, especially if they're trying to hide their drug or alcohol use.

Some drugs can result in noticeable physical symptoms, including:

- [pupils](#) that are larger or smaller than normal
- frequent [nosebleeds](#)
- shakes or tremors
- sudden [weight loss](#) or gain
- [difficulty sleeping](#)
- runny nose or sniffing

A person may be misusing drugs or alcohol if their use leads to:

- difficulty keeping up at school or work
- relationship or family problems
- legal or [financial difficulties](#)
- injuries — for example, due to accidents or violence after using drugs or alcohol

If you know that someone is using drugs or alcohol, they might be at risk of developing a problem if they:

- find it difficult to cut down or stop using
- spend a lot of their time trying to find or use drugs or alcohol
- use increasingly larger amounts of substances over time
- use substances more often over time
- have unpleasant symptoms when stopping or cutting down on drugs or alcohol (called '[withdrawal](#)')

However, not everyone who misuses drugs or alcohol wants (or needs) help.

It's also important to know that people may experience symptoms similar to those listed above but for reasons that *aren't* related to drug use. This is especially true of young people coping with the [challenges of adolescence](#).

If you aren't sure whether a person is misusing drugs or alcohol or needs help, start a conversation to see if they're OK.

How do I start a conversation about someone's drug or alcohol use?

Prepare for the chat

It's normal to be anxious about broaching the topic of drugs or alcohol. Preparation is key. Consider getting advice from a professional about how to talk to loved ones about drug use (see '[Resources and support](#)', below).

Earning and maintaining a person's trust is important. Don't go through their personal belongings or access private information on their social media. They may feel threatened, which can make them less likely to reach out for support.

Pick a time and place to talk where you won't be interrupted and will have some privacy. Some people find it less confronting to talk while walking together, instead of sitting face-to-face.

Only start the conversation when the person is not currently affected by drugs or alcohol.

Having the conversation

It's OK to ask someone directly about drug use. But don't make assumptions that the person is even using drugs, or about how much or how often they use drugs.

Use 'I' statements to express your concerns about the person. For example, "I'm a bit worried because..." or "I've noticed that lately..." Give the person a chance to respond and express their views and opinions. Try to listen to the person without being judgemental or accusatory.

Talk about the support available that can help the person reduce or stop their alcohol or drug use.

Say that you can talk to, and support, the person in the future — if you're able to. You could ask them if they want to chat again in a week or two.

The person may not agree that their alcohol or drug use is a problem and might become defensive or angry. If this happens, you haven't failed — the person may need more time to think about what you discussed.



What should I *not* say to someone about their drug or alcohol use?

When speaking to someone about their drug use, listen respectfully to their views, and respond calmly. The tone and the type of language you use is important.

Try to avoid the following, since this may upset the person and make them less likely to seek support:

- being judgmental
- lecturing the person
- making them feel guilty
- using bribes or threats
- using negative labels like 'addict'

How do I keep supporting a friend or family member?

There are many services available to help people who are struggling with drugs or alcohol. If the person is interested in professional help, you can help them find a local drug and alcohol treatment service.



FIND A HEALTH SERVICE — The [healthdirect Service Finder](#) can help you find doctors, pharmacies, hospitals and other health services.

If they pursue treatment, you can help the person by providing practical support, such as delivering meals and checking in regularly. Celebrate small successes and try to keep supporting them if they relapse. Drug and alcohol treatment and recovery takes time, and many people don't succeed the first time they try to quit.

It's also important to set boundaries with the person. Try not to 'overpromise': be realistic about any emotional, practical or financial support you can provide.

If you're concerned that the person may overdose on an opioid, you can access [Naloxone](#) for free and without a prescription through the Australian Government's Take Home Naloxone program. Naloxone is a medicine that can temporarily reverse the effects of an opioid overdose.

Learn more about the [Take Home Naloxone program here](#).

What if the person doesn't want help for drugs or alcohol?

Ultimately, it's the person's decision whether to seek professional help. Many people who misuse drugs or alcohol find it hard to ask for help at first, but may want to reach out later on. Be careful not to 'nag' the person, since this might discourage them from opening up in the future.

Clearly state any behaviours you expect, or won't tolerate, from the person. You might not accept drug use in your home, for example.

Encourage the person to use safely to minimise the risk of harming themselves — for example, through needle and syringe programs (NSPs) or [opioid replacement](#) programs.

Find an NSP in your state or territory [here](#). You can also use the [healthdirect Service Finder](#) to find one near you. Select 'By name' and type 'needle' into the search bar.

It's important to know that you can't force the person to stop using drugs or alcohol. Only they can choose to change.

How can I look after myself while supporting someone?

Supporting a friend or family member with a drug or alcohol misuse problem can be draining.

Here are some tips to help you look after yourself:

- Look after your physical and mental health by [eating well](#) and [keeping active](#).
- Seek support from your own friends and family.
- Contact your [GP](#) for advice and support, or one of the organisations listed below.
- Take a break from the person if you need to. Let them know when you'll be available again, so they don't feel abandoned.

When should I seek urgent help?

If a person is having an unusual reaction to a drug — or if you're worried about your own or others' safety — call triple zero (000) immediately.

Drugs and alcohol can affect people in different and unpredictable ways. Signs of an unusual or dangerous reaction to a drug can include:



- [difficulty breathing](#)
- severe drowsiness or unresponsiveness
- [seizures](#)
- [collapse](#) (falling unconscious)
- snoring deeply or making [choking](#) or gurgling sounds
- expressing [paranoid ideas](#) or hallucinating
- becoming agitated or [confused](#)
- [nausea](#) and [vomiting](#)
- [chest pain](#), or [abdominal pain](#) or cramps
- coordination problems
- blue fingernails or lips
- becoming pale or sweaty

It's important to seek immediate medical attention even if you're worried the person might get into trouble for taking illegal drugs. Emergency services will only notify police if there is a risk to them or the person's own safety, the safety of others or if someone dies.

A person's parent or guardian will only be notified if they are under 18.

If a person becomes aggressive or violent after consuming drugs or alcohol, don't stay with them if your own safety is at risk. You can still help the person by calling triple zero (000) once you're in a safe place.

Resources and support

- The [National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline](#) (1800 250 015) directs you to your local state alcohol and drug information service for free and confidential advice — as well as referral to services.
- [Drug Help](#) from the Australian Government offers information and resources.
- [Positive Choices](#) from the Australian Government also provides information, resources and drug education.
- [Al-Anon Family Groups Australia](#) offers support to the family and friends of someone struggling with alcohol.
- [Self-Help Addiction Recourse Centre](#) (SHARC) provides professional help and practical support to people who are looking after a family member living with addiction.
- [Cracks in the Ice](#) from the Australian Government has information on crystal methamphetamine ('ice') use.
- [Counselling Online](#) is a free, text-based counselling service for people seeking help for their own or a family member's drug use.
- [Drug Info](#) provides information about alcohol and other drugs.
- [Family Drug Support](#) offers information and support to the families of people struggling with drugs and alcohol — including a 24-hour support hotline (1300 368 186).
- [ReachOut](#) provides information, support and advice to young people.
- [Lifeline](#) (13 11 14) provides 24-hour phone and online counselling and support.

Sources:

[National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction](#) (AOD use in Australia), [Mental Health First Aid Australia](#) (Drug use problems), [Alcohol and Drug Foundation](#) (Having the conversation), [Australian Government - Department of Health](#) (Drug information), [Alcohol and Drug Foundation](#) (Alcohol), [Turning Point](#) (About addiction), [National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction](#) (Conceptualising Alcohol and Other Drug Issues), [ReachOut](#) (How to help a friend with a drug addiction), [Positive Choices](#) (What are the warning signs of dependence on drugs?), [Alcohol and Drug Foundation](#) (Talking to young people), [Positive Choices](#) (Starting the conversation when you are concerned about drug and alcohol use), [Beyond Blue](#) (Drugs, alcohol and mental health), [National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction](#) (Harm minimisation), [Positive Choices](#) (Helping someone who has taken a drug), [Australian Government - Department of Health](#) (What to do in an emergency), [Better Health Channel](#) (Drug Overdose)

Learn more here about the [development and quality assurance of healthdirect content](#).

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Australian Government
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Healthdirect Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to the Traditional Owners and to Elders both past and present.

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