

Drugs and asthma: A guide to staying safe for young people



Asthma is a long-term lung condition that affects over 5 million people in the UK, including 1.1 million children and young people (around 3 in every classroom). It affects the tubes that carry air in and out of the lungs, causing them to narrow in response to certain triggers, which can make it difficult to breathe.

If you or someone you know has asthma, it's really important to be aware of the impact alcohol, drugs and smoking can have.

Recreational drugs: the risks

Many common recreational drugs are known to trigger asthma symptoms or make long-term asthma worse:

- Cannabis (weed) can be an asthma trigger and can also lead to long-term lung damage, especially when smoked with tobacco.
- Cocaine can worsen asthma symptoms and cause asthma attacks, both when smoked and snorted.
- Crack cocaine can cause serious lung damage.
- Ketamine and hallucinogens, such as LSD (acid), can lead to breathing problems, especially if mixed with alcohol.
- Heroin and other opioids, such as fentanyl, may cause your breathing to slow down and block air from entering your lungs, making asthma symptoms worse.
- Drugs you inhale, such as poppers or nitrous oxide (laughing gas), can irritate your lungs and trigger asthma symptoms.
- Ecstasy (including MDMA) can cause dangerous reactions in people with asthma.



Smoking and asthma



Smoking can worsen asthma symptoms and cause attacks to happen more often. Watch out for other people's smoking - this can also increase how often you have asthma symptoms. Remember, over 80% of secondhand smoke is invisible.

Vaping or being around vape fumes can also increase the frequency of symptoms and attacks.

When taking an illegal drug, you may not know where it has come from or exactly what's inside it. Because of this, it's impossible to know how it will affect you until after you've taken it, putting you in danger.

Alcohol and asthma

Alcohol can affect people with asthma in different ways. Some people may notice asthma symptoms straight after a drink, while others may be able to have a couple of drinks without any issues. You could also have a reaction the following day.



Wine, cider and beer are considered more likely to trigger asthma attacks. Clear spirits like gin, vodka and rum can be known as more 'asthma friendly'. This is because they contain less of the substances known to trigger asthma symptoms: histamines and sulphates. However, there is limited evidence on this, so it's always best to be cautious.

Top tips for staying safe

The best way to stay safe is to avoid taking recreational drugs altogether. However, if you do find yourself in a situation where you know you or others may be drinking or taking drugs, remembering these things can help lower the risk:

- If you have a preventer inhaler, make sure you always take it as prescribed.
- Always carry your blue reliever inhaler. Keep it in a brightly coloured bag or case so it's easy to find and double-check you have it when leaving the house. Let your friends know whereabouts it is in your bag or pockets in case they need to help out.
- Have an asthma buddy. Find a trusted friend you can talk to about your asthma, who will have your back when you need a time out and can help you if you have an attack. Never walk off by yourself during an attack - stay with your friend.
- Know what to do if you have an attack. Take a picture of your written asthma action plan on your phone as a reminder. Send it to friends so they know what to do too.
- Avoid mixing different drugs or drugs and alcohol. Mixing substances exaggerates their effects, increasing your chances of having an attack.
- Remember drinking or taking drugs in an unfamiliar or uncontrolled environment increases your risk, as you may not be able to get help when you need it.
- Set a timer on your phone to remind you to take regular breaks for water and a rest.
- Don't hesitate to seek medical help. You or your friends might worry about getting in trouble for drinking or taking drugs, but if you need to dial 999 based on your asthma plan, do so straight away. Your parents or carers will be relieved you acted responsibly when help was needed, and the repercussions will be minimal compared to if you don't get help and become seriously ill or die.

Get help with asthma and smoking, drinking or drugs

- You can find out more information on asthma.org.uk, nhs.uk, talktofrank.com and blf.org.uk (British Lung Foundation). Being an expert on your asthma can help you enjoy life safely.
- Compass is here to support children and young people up to age 25 with any concerns around drugs, alcohol and smoking. We're available Mon-Thurs 9am-5pm and Fri 9am-4.30pm. Get in touch via:

 ChatHealth confidential texting service: **07507 331 525**  Give us a ring: **01788 578 227**