

Advice for Parents & Caregivers

Mixing Drugs Explained



Before we start

If you're reading this because you're worried about mixing substances, that concern matters. Most serious harm doesn't come from one drug alone, but from combinations.

This guide isn't here to scare you. It's here to explain why mixing increases risk, even when each substance feels familiar on its own.

Who this guide is for

This is for parents and carers who want calm, clear information about mixing substances, and practical ways to reduce harm through communication rather than fear.

Why this matters

Mixing substances is one of the biggest risk factors for serious harm and overdose. This includes mixing illegal drugs with alcohol or prescription medications.

What mixing drugs means

Mixing means using more than one substance close together in time. This could be alcohol with drugs, multiple drugs together, or drugs combined with prescribed medicines.

What mixing drugs does

When substances are mixed, their effects interact in unpredictable ways. Some combinations increase strain on the heart, others suppress breathing, and some raise the risk of overheating or confusion.

Because effects overlap, it becomes harder to spot when something is going wrong.

What we see in real life

In real life, mixing substances often happens without planning. Alcohol is frequently involved, which significantly increases risk even when other drugs are taken in small amounts.

Alcohol plus stimulants: Mixing alcohol with stimulants like cocaine or MDMA can mask feelings of intoxication. This can lead to taking more than intended, placing extra strain on the heart and increasing the risk of collapse later on.

Alcohol plus benzodiazepines: Both substances suppress the central nervous system. Together, they greatly increase the risk of slowed or stopped breathing.

An added risk today: Some non-prescribed benzodiazepines in the UK have been found to contain nitazenes. These are very strong opioids that further suppress breathing. This means mixing alcohol with what someone believes is a benzodiazepine can be far more dangerous than expected, even at low doses.

Why harm escalates quickly: When multiple substances are in the body at once, warning signs can be missed or misunderstood. People may appear to 'fall asleep' when they are actually in medical danger.

What's changed and what people often miss

Mixing substances is often normalised in social settings. People may see it as routine without understanding how much risk increases when drugs are combined.

Why harm happens

The body has to process multiple substances at once, increasing stress on the heart, liver, and nervous system. Alcohol is especially risky when mixed with stimulants or sedatives.

Signs something may not be right

Extreme drowsiness, confusion, vomiting, overheating, irregular breathing, or collapse are warning signs. Trust patterns rather than single signs.

How to talk to your child about this

Be clear that mixing substances is one of the biggest risk factors. Focus on unpredictability and safety rather than individual drugs or punishment.

Peer pressure and the need to fit in

In group settings, mixing substances can feel expected. Young people may follow peers without realising how quickly risk increases when substances are combined.

What your child can say if they're offered drugs

Ages 10–12

- No thanks.
- I'm not allowed.
- I'm telling an adult.

Ages 13–15

- Nah, not my thing.
- I'm sticking with one thing.
- I'm good, thanks.

Ages 16–18

- I'm not mixing.
- I'm good as I am.
- I'm pacing myself.

When to be concerned

Confusion, breathing problems, collapse, repeated vomiting, or any signs of overdose are reasons to seek help immediately.

A final note

Even familiar substances can become dangerous when combined. Staying calm, informed, and available reduces harm more than confrontation ever will.

Educational use only. Not medical advice. If someone is unwell or at risk, seek professional medical help or call 999 in an emergency.