

# What to look for

Dear Denise:

What are some of the signs of drug use we can look for to get an idea if a loved one is using drugs?

Carl

Dear Carl:

There are many signs depending on type of drugs, age of drug user, relationship to person, etc. I will try to give you as much detail as possible and you will have to tailor it to your own situation. Because of my limited space in this letter I think I will answer with a couple of lists rather in a discussion manner.

If you suspect a teenager might be using drugs there are plenty of possible signs. I say "possible" because when dealing with teens many of the signs are the same as just being a teenager. The more characteristics on the list that are attributed to one person the more chance you might be dealing with a young person using drugs. Here are some things to look for in a list of lifestyle changes: isolating, acting secretive, newfound demand for privacy, mood swings, trouble at school, change of friends, becoming defiant, lack of respect for authority, avoiding eye contact, low energy, appetite changes, constant scratching (associated with opioids), wearing long sleeves in the summer, abandoning social activities, evasive answers, forgetfulness, rapid fluctuation in weight, being very protective of a backpack. As you can see, reading this list you might just think it's just being a teenager, and that is quite possible. Looking back on my own experience I would say this. Tread lightly, be aware, ask questions, engage, and if you have to make the choice of worrying about your teen being insulted that you don't trust them or preventing a long road to addiction and bad behavior, go for the latter. We need to do what we can to keep these kids alive and if we have to insult them in the process so be it. I wish I had asked more questions.

Here are some of the things to look for not related to habits but related to paraphernalia and other things. Odd smells, random containers with cotton swabs, pills, white powder or brown powder residue, empty plastic containers, metal/water proof container, little pcs of papers, ledgers, flashlights, phone lists (descriptions of people but not names), butane lighters, spoons, small scales, small pcs of aluminum foil, empty tubes from the inside of ball point pens, belts (for tourniquet), things taken apart and not put back together, baggies, rubber bands, coloring books and pencils (mostly female meth addicts), nickels (for calibrating digital scales), pipes and needles.

Much of what I have been listing can relate to all genders and ages, not just teens. I never really knew what the drugs looked like but you would probably recognize them if you found them. Prescription pills, heroin, and fentanyl are the most familiar opioids used. I would suggest if you want to know what heroin and fentanyl look like (the different colors and forms) as well as meth and cocaine check online. It is better for you to see them for yourself than for me to describe them.

Something else to look out for around your home and environment : Are you missing any cash? Are you missing prescription pills? Any favorite things (often small and relatively

valuable like jewelry and electronics) missing? Have you noticed your teen paying an unusual amount of time at the grandparents who might be on a variety of prescription drugs? I mention all of these things for this reason. Often someone who abuses drugs will steal things, just enough for them to use but not enough for us to notice right off that they are missing. Maybe when we get to the end of a 30 day prescription we notice we only get 22 days and the rest of the pills are gone. Or, we had cash put aside and we take the cash and there isn't as much there as we put there. When you ask about this don't be surprised if your loved one says you must have accidentally taken more than one pill a day or miscounted, or you probably used the cash and forgot, and you must have lost the jewelry last time you wore it.

I think you have enough to start with here. For more information about signs and situations check out NIDA (National Institute on Drug Abuse) and [surrycountycare.com](http://surrycountycare.com). I hope this overview was helpful.

Sincerely,  
Denise Krochta