Alcohol and Drug Information Sheet

What constitutes a ‘drug’?
In essence, a drug is any substance (with the exception of food and water) which, when consumed, alters the mind’s and body’s function either physiologically and/or psychologically. Some drugs are legal (e.g., alcohol, caffeine and tobacco) whilst others are illegal (e.g. cannabis, ecstasy, cocaine and heroin). Some drugs are used in an illicit fashion (i.e., using someone else’s prescription pharmaceuticals) or are used as recommended (i.e., using pharmaceuticals prescribed to you, such as antidepressants, benzodiazepines or methadone at the correct dosage). Drugs affect the central nervous system and can alter a person's mood, thinking and behaviour. Generally speaking, drugs can be divided into four categories:

- **Depressants**: Decrease alertness by slowing down the activity of the central nervous system and brain (e.g., ghb (liquid fantasy), rohypnol, heroin, alcohol, benzodiazepines, inhalants and analgesics).
- **Stimulants**: Increase the body's state of arousal by increasing the activity of the brain (e.g., caffeine, nicotine, cocaine, speed, ice, and dexamphetamines).
- **Hallucinogens**: Alter perceptions and can cause hallucinations, such as seeing or hearing something that is not there, as well as causing other sensory disturbances (e.g., LSD, mescaline and 'magic mushrooms').
- **Other**: Some drugs fall into the 'other' category, as they may have properties of more than one class (i.e., marijuana is primarily a depressant, however has both hallucinogenic and stimulant qualities; some ecstasy tablets have components of each of the three categories listed above; ketamine is primarily a hallucinogenic but has anaesthetic properties).

How come people use alcohol & drugs?
People use drugs for diverse reasons, some of which include:

- to enjoy oneself
- to promote relaxation
- to temporarily forget about problems
- to gain confidence/feel good about oneself
- to enhance social situations or lessen social inhibitions
- as a way of coping with/managing problems
- out of curiosity
- peer pressure/conformity/image amongst peers
- as a form of escapism/avoidance
- to celebrate or commiserate
- to relieve boredom, stress or other unpleasant emotional states
- self-medicating (i.e., psychological or physical pain)

**The effects of drugs.**
The experience that a person has when using alcohol or other drugs will be affected by three interrelated factors:

- **Individual:** Mood, physical size, gender, personality, expectations of the drug/experience, tolerance, whether the person has food in his/her stomach, whether individual has mixed different drugs during a session (polymedic use)

- **Drug:** The particular drug being used, the quantity used, how it is used (i.e., snorted, inhaled, ingested, shelved/shafted, injected) and the strength and purity of the drug, interactions between drugs when mixed).

- **Environment:** Whether the person is using it with friends, on his/her own, in a social setting or at home, at work, before or while driving.

**Definitions**

**Tolerance:** Gradually, over a period of time, an individual’s tolerance will increase, which means that the individual will need to take more of the drug to achieve the same effects they did previously with smaller quantities.

**Dependence:** This means that the drug becomes central to a person’s life and they feel they cannot function properly without it. **Physical dependence** is indicated when the body experiences unpleasant side effects if the drug is not taken (i.e., goose bumps/crawling sensations underneath skin, nausea, vomiting and so forth. **Psychological dependence** is indicated when an individual believes he/she needs the drug to be able to function properly (i.e., “If I stop taking it, I will not be able to cope with the demands of university.”).

**Withdrawal:** Denotes a series of symptoms that may occur when a drug on which a user is physically dependent upon a drug that the individual stops taking or suddenly reduces. The withdrawal symptoms vary depending on a range of factors including drug type and amount used. When the body has become accustomed to the drug for normal function and use is ceased, the body will try to re-establish balance which produces withdrawal symptoms.

**Continuum of substance use**

Non-use___Experimental use___Recreational use___Problematic use

**Dependent use**

- **Non-use:** People may choose not to drink, smoke or take drugs for many personal reasons, such as, health and fitness, poor health, religious beliefs, because they don’t like the effects or don’t like the taste, medical conditions, pregnancy, cultural standards and so forth.

- **Experimental use:** Around 80% of 14 year-olds have tried alcohol. As adolescents and even well into our adult years, the temptation to, experiment with new drugs, or try out different kinds of alcoholic drinks, is often a factor that motivates use.
• **Recreational use:** This refers to social use of substances, and can range from those who drink a toast on special occasions to people who head down to the pub for a few coldies after work. Generally, recreational users of drugs and alcohol engage in use for their own enjoyment and pleasure. Benefits outweigh the costs; however there may be some negative consequences such as loss of a driving licence or poor health.

• **Problematic use:** During this phase, costs may begin to outweigh the benefits as the individual’s usage becomes more entrenched. Problems may begin to arise or intensify, such as relationship difficulties/breakdown, financial problems, legal difficulties, lack of social responsibility/friendships, health concerns and violence/aggression. People often continue to use at this point motivated by the desire to avoid facing up to these problems. Tolerance increases.

• **Dependent use:** Individuals at this stage of substance use may feel out of control, ruled by intense cravings and ultimately, the pursuit of, or indulgence in, the substance becomes the priority. The individual who becomes reliant on substances is often in emotional pain or distress and this is accompanied by physical dependency, which is complicated by unbearable withdrawal symptoms when the substance cannot be obtained for use.

**Impact on physical health & mental wellbeing**
Drug and/or alcohol use negatively impact upon physical wellbeing and can lead to health problems, such as respiratory diseases, cancers, brain/liver damage, heart disease and so forth. In addition to these adverse physical effects, drugs and/or alcohol use can increase the risk of other significant harms, including:

- antisocial behaviours including crime, violence and fights
- road crashes, pedestrian accidents, and deaths related to both
- other accidental injuries
- drownings
- suicide
- unwanted or unsafe sexual activities
- sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancy
- family, relationship, occupational difficulties

**Poly-drug use**
Poly drug use is when two or more drugs are used concurrently or shortly following each other. Manufacturers of illegal drugs often combine different drugs to achieve a specific effect or cut drugs with cheaper chemicals to increase revenue and save money. This can result in an individual unintentionally combining drugs. The risk of harm is increased if more than one drug is used at a time, especially when drugs of unknown content and purity are combined. This includes mixing over-the-counter drugs, prescription drugs, and illegal drugs.

Poly drug use increases the risk of the following symptoms and effects:

- heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature may be exaggerated, which can increase the chance of serious problems occurring
- severe emotional and mental disturbances such as panic attacks and paranoia
• overdose (either depressant or stimulant overdose)

Where to next? How do I find help?
A variety of publications, detailed information pamphlets on specific drugs and alcohol and other useful resources are produced by the Drug and Alcohol Office and are available by phoning HealthInfo on 1300 135 030 or by visiting http://www.dao.health.wa.gov.au. The website http://www.drugaware.com.au is also useful for obtaining specific information about drugs and alcohol.

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS): provides a 24-hour confidential helpline, Metropolitan: (08)9442 5000 or Rural: 1800 198 024, which offers advice, information, counselling and referral services.

Parent Drug Information Service (PDIS) is a confidential telephone service offered for parent’s who are being affected by their son’s or daughter’s substance use/abuse. Metropolitan: (08) 9442 5050 or Rural: 1800 653 203.

Services such as DAWN offer outpatient withdrawal services while Next Step offers inpatient detoxification services. Cyrenian House, Rosella House, Salvation Army, Palmerston, and Serenity Lodge all offer residential services (i.e., live-in programs). Holyoake, Palmerston, Cyrenian & Salvation Army all form part of a network of dedicated drug and alcohol community based services, which provide counselling, support groups and education to users, their families, children, and partner. Some agencies offer generic services, responding to anyone with a drug or alcohol issue, whilst others target their programs towards particular age groups, gender, relation to user and so forth.

For further information on any of these services, please refer to http://www.dao.health.wa.gov.au where access can be gained to the alcohol and drug services directory. If you do not have access to the internet, phone ADIS for assistance.