

Keeping Kids Safe

A GUIDE TO DRUG AND ALCOHOL PREVENTION



Red Ribbon Week Theme

The National Family Partnership holds a contest for each year's national theme.

The 2025 winning entry, "Life Is a Puzzle, Solve It Drug Free," was suggested by digital art teacher Cheryl Holsapfel and student Carter Weinmann from Ohio's Solon Middle School. The National Family Partnership said this theme underscores how each decision we make contributes to the larger story of a drug-free life, like jigsaw pieces.

The nationwide observance of Red Ribbon Week is held from Oct. 23 to Oct. 31. Everyone is encouraged to embrace a healthy lifestyle by making good choices that lead to a more promising future. There's a special emphasis on advocating for a drug-free lifestyle during this week.

National Family Partnership, a grassroots nonprofit organization, was founded as the National Federation of Parents for Drug Free Youth in 1980 by a handful of concerned parents who wanted to play a leadership role in drug prevention. "Our mission is to lead and support our nation's families and communities in nurturing the full potential of healthy, drug-free youth," according to NFP's official website.

The Red Ribbon campaign followed in 1985 in response to the tragic death of DEA Agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena. Mourners wore these distinctive ribbons and the idea



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spread. After four decades, Red Ribbon Week is now recognized as the largest and longest-running drug prevention initiative in the United States. The annual theme contest draws thousands of entries, as participants are asked to create slogans that align with the

campaign's larger mission.

Organizers said "Life Is a Puzzle, Solve It Drug Free" was chosen for its compelling message about perseverance. "I was genuinely surprised and thrilled to win the Red Ribbon Contest!" Carter Weinmann told the National Family

Partnership. "I drew inspiration from previous winners and eagerly anticipate seeing my theme implemented nationwide."

Your theme could be chosen next! Submissions for the 2026 Red Ribbon Week Theme Contest will be accepted from Jan.

1 through Dec. 4, 2025. Prize winners receive \$500 in merchandise that reflects the theme of Red Ribbon Week, provided by sponsor Nimco, Inc. For additional details about the contest and how to get involved, visit www.RedRibbon.org.

Because of the stigma surrounding substance use, many people struggling with addiction may try to keep their challenges private. Still, there are common signs that can indicate someone is in need of help. If you are concerned about a family member or loved one, being aware of these clues may help you recognize when support is needed.

CRAVING AND TOLERANCE

A common feature of substance use disorder is the feeling that alcohol or drugs are needed just to get through daily life. When a person doesn't have access to these substances, they may become anxious, depressed or restless. In some cases, substance use can start to overshadow work, relationships, and other priorities. Over time, the body builds tolerance, meaning more of the substance is needed to feel the same effect. This escalation can lead to serious health risks, including overdose, as doses increase or as people turn to more dangerous substances.

DENIAL AND WITHDRAWAL

Denial of the harmful effect of substance use is one of the most recognizable features of substance use disorder. People may minimize or deflect responsibility for difficulties such as legal issues, strained relationships or financial problems.

When someone with a substance use disorder cannot access alcohol or drugs, they may experience withdrawal symptoms that can include shaking, nausea or intense



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Know the Signs

There are reliable indicators to look for if you're worried someone is abusing drugs or alcohol.

anxiety.

Withdrawal looks different depending on the substance, but it often creates a major obstacle to recovery and underscores the medical complexity of treatment.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Before starting a conversation with children about substance use, check your local and state laws to understand the potential legal consequences.

When talking, focus not only on penalties but also on health risks and the importance of making safe choices.

Certain everyday items can sometimes be repurposed for substance use. At home, in garages, or even at corner stores, young people may find items they can use for substance abuse. These can include plastic baggies or small paper bags, glass vials, or unlabeled pill bottles. For marijuana, rolling papers,

pipes, bongs, or modified e-cigarettes may be used. In cases involving stronger substances, paraphernalia may include needles, cut-up drinking straws, aluminum foil, or spoons.

Recognizing these items can help parents or caregivers start open, nonjudgmental conversations with children about the risks of substance use, while also making clear that help and support are available.

DANGERS OF RELAPSE

Recovery from substance use disorder often takes time, and many people make several attempts before achieving lasting change. You can support someone in recovery by helping reduce situations or environments that may trigger cravings. Encourage them to explore a range of evidence-based supports, which may include counseling, medication-assisted treatment, or peer support groups.

The Truth About Vaping

Health professionals are expressing alarm about the rise in vaping among adolescents.

Initially marketed as a less harmful alternative to traditional cigarettes, vaping has been shown to pose significant risks – not least of which is the potential for nicotine addiction. Yet experts have reported a surge in vaping among young people.

A substantial portion of high school students have experimented with vaping. It could be as many as one in five, according to a study from the Centers for Disease Control. Nicotine-free pod liquids and refills are available, but they aren't as easy to find. Perhaps unsurprisingly, research shows that those who vape are substantially more likely to transition to cigarette smoking in the future.

That's why adolescents need accurate information regarding the potential hazards of vaping.

LACK OF AWARENESS

When vaping, nicotine is rapidly absorbed through the lung's blood vessels, reaching the brain in approximately 10 seconds. This stimulates the dopamine system, reinforcing behavior perceived as beneficial. A vicious cycle then begins.

Young people are often

unaware of the risks, but so are their parents. A survey of parents of middle and high school students by the Partnership to End Addiction found that 40 percent were unconcerned about their child's potential use of vape products. But the effects of nicotine is actually more pronounced among those under the age of 25, since their brains are still developing.

ASSOCIATED DANGERS

Adolescents tend to underestimate the risk of developing an addiction to nicotine. When they eventually try to quit, it's much more difficult because the adolescent brain has a heightened sensitivity to rewards. Beyond nicotine addiction, vaping can adversely affect lung health, contributing to respiratory issues and other health

complications.

Since vaping is often outlawed or against school policy, students may put their academic future at risk by engaging in the activity.

PROACTIVE MEASURES

Parents need to educate themselves about the facts surrounding vaping, then have calm and open discussions about the topic. Try to

understand the reasons behind a child's potential use, while clearly communicating expectations. Consider role-playing scenarios to help them resist peer pressure. Model healthy behaviors around them. Avoid the temptation to lecture, scold, or punish children. Instead, approach this in the same manner you would with any other health concern.



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The Danger at Home

Parents tend to worry about alcohol and marijuana, but prescription drug abuse ranks third among those age 14 and younger.

Kids don't have to go far to get them. These drugs, which include anti-depressants, stimulants, opioids and other potent prescriptions, can often be found inside the bathroom medicine cabinet.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

When a healthcare provider prescribes medication, they consider various factors, including the patient's height, weight, past medical history and metabolic rate of the drug. But when a drug is misused, these critical precautions are unknown or disregarded. Drug misuse is defined as taking medicine prescribed to someone else, even if the medical issue is similar. It's also a term for when drugs are used in a manner inconsistent with usage recommendations, as when someone crushes pills for snorting.

People abuse prescription medication when they intentionally ingest it to achieve intoxication rather than to address a health condition, and when any drug is combined with other substances or alcohol.



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CONCERNS ABOUT SIDE EFFECTS

Advertisements for medications are required to include an extensive list of any potential side effects. While some of these effects might merely cause discomfort, others can be severe and some even result in death. For instance, opioids such as oxycodone can cause gastrointestinal distress and constipation but also

more serious respiratory issues that can be fatal. Stimulants like Adderall may induce feelings of paranoia, rapid heart rate and overheating. Similarly, depressants such as barbiturates can lead to excessive sedation and shallow breathing. There's a very real risk that you could stop breathing, particularly when combined with alcohol.

TAKE SAFETY PRECAUTIONS

Today, prescription drug misuse accounts for more than half of the annual overdose fatalities in the United States, with opioids making up a significant portion of the cases. The National Family Partnership, though best known for hosting Red Ribbon Week, also spearheads the Lock Your Meds campaign.

This initiative aims to foster conversations between adults and children regarding the dangers of prescription drug misuse. The NFP encourages adults to conduct a careful inventory of their medications and then secure their medicine cabinets. You can find valuable guidance on the safe disposal of prescription drugs on their website, www.lockyourmeds.org.

Understanding Narcan

Every parent should be aware of this essential resource in fighting opioid-related fatalities.

Narcan, with the generic name naloxone, has become a go-to therapy in the event of opioid overdoses. Thousands of lives have been saved. Here's what parents need to know:

HOW IT WORKS

Signs of opioid overdose may include unresponsiveness or unconsciousness, bluish lips, gums or fingertips, shallow breathing, or a slow or irregular heartbeat. If you find someone overdosing, Narcan can provide a rapid and effective intervention. The medicine works by attaching to the same brain receptors as opioids, effectively blocking their effects. When all works as it should, victims regain consciousness within one to three minutes after receiving the therapy.

DIFFERENT APPLICATIONS

Narcan is available in several forms, including injectable and nasal spray options. They're designed for ease of use even by those without medical training. If a parent or caregiver suspects that someone is experiencing an opioid overdose, administering Narcan can temporarily mitigate the overdose's effects. This allows critical time for emergency medical



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assistance to arrive.

WHEN TO ADMINISTER

While Narcan is an effective medication that reverses the effects of an overdose, it's designed specifically for opioids. Common opioids include fentanyl, heroin, oxycodone, codeine, hydrocodone and morphine. Narcan will not work in cases that present the same symptoms, like a diabetic

coma or heart attack. Thankfully, the Food and Drug Administration has indicated that the therapy does not pose additional risks when given to someone who is not experiencing an opioid overdose. So, keep Narcan readily available in households where individuals may be at risk for accidental overdoses, including those prescribed pain medications or anyone who travels in circles

affected by opioid misuse.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Narcan is an essential emergency response tool, designed to reverse the effects of a potentially fatal opioid overdose. Its role is to keep someone alive long enough to access help and treatment options. While naloxone itself is not a cure for opioid use disorder, it offers a crucial opportunity for

recovery by preventing tragedy in the moment.

If you administer Narcan, consider following up with the person later—when they are safe—to connect them with professional support such as rehabilitation programs, counseling, or peer support groups. Combined with these longer-term strategies, access to Narcan can open the door to a safer and healthier future.

Addiction 101

Despite affecting millions of people, addiction remains an often misunderstood condition.

Gaining a clearer understanding of the science behind addiction helps build awareness, foster empathy and guide the use of effective therapies. Addiction is characterized by the compulsive use of substances or engagement in activities despite harmful consequences. It can take many forms, from alcohol and drug use to gambling and other behaviors.

It's important to understand, however, that addiction isn't the result of a lack of willpower and it isn't a moral weakness. It is a medical condition influenced by psychological, biological and social factors. Here's a look:

HOW ADDICTION STARTS

At the core of addiction is the brain's reward system, which evolved to reinforce survival behaviors such as eating, drinking, working and social interaction. When someone uses addictive substances or engages in addictive behaviors, the brain releases dopamine, a neurotransmitter linked to rewards and pleasure. In a healthy system, dopamine levels are carefully regulated in response to natural stimuli. But when certain substances or activities are



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introduced, this balance can be disrupted, flooding the brain with excess dopamine.

A GROWING PROBLEM

A surge of dopamine can create intense feelings of euphoria, reinforcing the cycle of addictive behavior. Over time, the brain adapts to these heightened levels by producing less dopamine and reducing the sensitivity of its

receptors. As tolerance builds, larger amounts of the substance are needed to achieve the same effect. This desensitization of the reward system makes it harder for people with substance use disorders to experience pleasure from everyday activities, deepening the grip of addiction.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Addiction is the result of

the interplay of genetic, psychological and environmental factors. Studies indicate that genetics can account for approximately 40 to 60 percent of someone's vulnerability to addiction. The research suggests that inherited traits may influence the brain's reaction to both substances and stressors. Environmental factors, including lack of parental

supervision, early exposure to drugs and alcohol and peer pressure can elevate the risks. Stressful life events and trauma may contribute to addiction. Those with mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression or ADHD demonstrate an increased susceptibility to addiction. They may turn to substance use as a means of self-medication, leading to dependency.

Enrique ‘Kiki’ Camarena

A drug-enforcement agent’s brave sacrifice sparked the longest-running drug prevention program in U.S. history.

In the ‘70s and ‘80s, Enrique “Kiki” Camarena was a special agent for the Drug Enforcement Administration whose efforts focused on dismantling one of the most active drug distribution networks in the supply line between Mexico and the United States. His murder drew national attention toward an escalating drug crisis and eventually led to the founding of the National Red Ribbon Campaign.

HIS EARLY YEARS

Born on July 26, 1947, in Mexicali, Baja California, Camarena completed his high school education in Calexico, California. In 1968, he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps, where he served honorably. Following his service in the military, Camarena became an active member of his community, initially working as a firefighter and later transitioning into law enforcement as a police officer in his hometown.

FOCUS ON DRUG CRISIS

Camarena’s commitment and expertise led to his advancement as a narcotics investigator in Imperial County. Driven by a determination to combat the worsening drug epidemic in America, he joined the DEA in 1974. His mother expressed understandable concerns regarding Camarena’s safety. But he remained steadfast in his mission: “Even if I’m only one

person,” he memorably answered, “I can make a difference.” Throughout his career, Camarena exemplified that commitment.

HIS ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

In the midst of investigating a billion-dollar drug cartel, Camarena was abducted on Feb. 7, 1985. He’d been headed to lunch with his wife. A massive search followed and Camarena’s body was discovered on March 5 in Mexico. Authorities determined that his assassination was orchestrated by the drug traffickers he’d been working to apprehend. To honor his dedication and sacrifice, people began wearing red ribbons as symbols of remembrance. Soon, the ribbon came to represent a nationwide commitment to addressing this critical issue.

RED RIBBON WEEK

The city of Calexico launched the first Red Ribbon Week in 1985 as a tribute to Kiki Camarena and to raise awareness of the drug epidemic affecting the country. This initiative rapidly gained traction, leading to national recognition in 1988. President Ronald Reagan and First Lady Nancy Reagan served as honorary chairpersons for Red Ribbon Week, further embedding Camarena’s legacy in the collective effort against drug abuse.

