

Uppers and Downers

First, let's focus on uppers. An upper is considered to be in a class of drugs referred to as stimulants. Simply put, these are drugs that stimulate (or speed up) the mind and body. Caffeine (which is found in coffee, tea, or soft drinks) is an example of a relatively mild stimulant. More potent stimulants include cocaine (also called coke or crack) and amphetamines or methamphetamines (also called crystal, crank, or speed). Other stimulants include ecstasy, ice, and even some diet pills.

Stimulants speed up body functions. For instance, your heart beats faster, your blood pressure rises, thoughts and feelings race, and you don't seem to feel hungry or tired. For a while, stimulants may make you feel strong, wide awake, excited, and in control, but these are really misleading feelings. In reality, the drug is forcing your body to speed up more than it should. And when the drug begins to wear off, there is a tendency to want more of it so you can maintain that same "being up" feeling. Inevitably, however, the drug wears off completely, and you feel exhausted, depressed, and tired. Stimulants are addictive to both the body and the mind. With the exception of caffeine, once you get used to them, it's difficult to stop unless you get professional help.

There are serious potential toxic effects from stimulants. For example, cocaine, amphetamine, and methamphetamine can each cause severe heart problems, seizures, and strokes—even in healthy people. Ecstasy (often used by young people at "raves") may cause seizures, potentially fatal heart problems, and kidney failure.

Downers

Downers are the opposite of uppers. These drugs are considered to be in a class that is referred to as depressants. This group includes alcohol, sleeping pills, and tranquilizers. Doctors sometimes prescribe these drugs to certain patients. When taken correctly, they can help people. But when too many are taken over too short a time, depressants can cause serious problems and even death.

Unlike stimulants, depressants slow down the brain's functions and can help a person relax and sleep. Although depressants may first make you less shy and more talkative, when too many are taken, your speech may become slurred and your body movements clumsy and jerky. You appear drunk. This is even worse when you take tranquilizers or sleeping pills along with alcohol. This combination of depressants can pose a health problem for you since—ultimately—all of these drugs must be filtered through your liver. Since the liver can't always handle this kind of overload, the risk of overdose is great, and a person can die of respiratory arrest. Like stimulants, depressants can also be addictive.

The best way to prevent problems with drugs is simply not to use them. If you're under emotional stress, don't take drugs to deal with your problems. Instead try to understand what's causing your depression, anxiety, or loneliness. Ask for the help of a friend or a professional.

If you already have a problem with drugs or alcohol, consider joining a self-help group of people with similar problems, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous. If you're concerned about another person's drug use, don't just ignore the problem; rather, calmly frame the issue as a medical problem and offer assistance by making a phone call to schedule an appointment

for professional help. For example, you might consider calling Kaiser Permanente's Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program for confidential advice and treatment. You can also call the National Institute of Drug Abuse hotline. The number is 1-800-662-HELP (1-800-662-4357).

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For more health information ...

- Connect to our Web site at *members.kp.org*
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit your facility's Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult your doctor.