

Drug education

Year 9, Lesson 4: Alcohol and cannabis



Alcohol and cannabis

This is the fourth of five drug education lessons, for year 9. This lesson explores the effects of different patterns of alcohol use, and the health risks associated with alcohol and cannabis use.

Classroom-ready PowerPoint versions of the lesson plans are available to [members](#) of the PSHE Association.

Learning objective

To learn about the short and long-term effects of alcohol and cannabis use on individuals.

Learning outcomes

Students will be able to:

- analyse the factors that might affect someone's decision to use or not use substances
- describe some of the health risks associated with occasional and problematic substance use
- identify and challenge misconceptions related to cannabis use and drinking alcohol

Climate for learning

Make sure you have read the accompanying teacher guidance notes before teaching this lesson. These include relevant subject knowledge for this topic, guidance on creating a safe learning environment, and curriculum links.

Resources required

- Box or envelope for questions
- Flip chart paper and markers
- Resource 1: *Alcohol patterns* [one per small group of 3-4 students]
- Resource 1a: *Alcohol patterns and risks* [support option, as required]
- Resource 2: *Continue the conversation* [one per pair]
- Resource 2a: *Find the response* [support option, as required]

Baseline assessment

Introduction (Slides 10–11, 2 mins)

Ensure ground rules are established with the group before teaching this lesson and make students aware of the question box, which will be available throughout the lesson. Remind students that if they have worries or questions during or after the lesson, that they do not want to raise in front of the class, they can write their question on a piece of paper, anonymously or with their name, and put it in the question box.

Introduce the learning objective and outcomes and explain that today's lesson will explore the effects of drug use on mental and physical health, with a focus on alcohol and cannabis.

Baseline assessment activity (Slides 12–13, 8 mins)

Ask students to create a mind map around the following question: What are the potential risks of using alcohol or other drugs?

As this is a baseline assessment, students should complete their mind map individually and without any input or prompting. The activity is intended to measure what students currently perceive as a risk.

Take feedback from students but remind them not to add to their mind map while taking suggestions from the class.

Then, as a class, discuss what categories the risks might fall into, for example: short or long-term; physical, emotional, social, financial or legal; risks to the person using the drug, their family and friends, their community. Ask students if they think there are any situations that might increase or decrease the risk associated with drug or alcohol use.

Core activities

Factors affecting decisions (Slide 14, 15 mins)

Write each of the situations below on separate pieces of flipchart paper, divide the class into six groups and give each group one of the sheets:

- Meeting someone unfamiliar
- Preparing for exams
- Dancing at a crowded party
- Being in an unfamiliar place
- Having had a stressful day
- Being at home alone

Ask students to imagine that a young person is deciding whether to use a drug or drink alcohol in each of these scenarios. In their groups, students should write on the flipchart paper their responses to the following questions:

- What effect (if any) might the situation have on whether the young person decides to use a drug or drink alcohol?
- How might the situation affect the risks the young person faces if they do choose to use a drug or drink alcohol?
- How might the situation be made safer and/or where could the young person get support?

Afterwards, ask the groups to swap their sheets so that they can add any additional ideas to each other's situations.

Gather feedback from the groups. Students might suggest:

- *A person might be more likely to use drugs or drink alcohol in situations where many people are drinking or using drugs, such as at a party; or where they want to 'impress' someone they have just met.*
- *Each of the situations may have a different effect on different people. For example, if a person felt stressed about their upcoming exams they may use unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as drugs or alcohol. Alternatively, in the same situation a person may consider their upcoming exams to be a reason that they do not want to drink alcohol or use a drug, as they need to care for their physical and mental health at this time and maximise time for study and preparation.*
- *Support could be sought in school through a teacher, member of pastoral staff or school counsellor; or outside of school such as through a parent, friend or contacting Childline or a similar service. They may also suggest ways to reduce risk in the immediate situation, for example by the person removing themselves from the situation; making a plan with friends before going out, for keeping each other safe; or using healthy coping strategies to deal with stress and anxiety.*
- *The level of risk would vary depending on whom the person was surrounded by, for example the risk from using a drug would be especially high if a person was alone and needed medical support.*



Challenge: Ask students to write down any other factors they can think of that might affect the level of risk a person experiences in relation to drug, alcohol or tobacco use.

Alcohol patterns (Slide 15, 10 mins)

Remind students that many people do not drink alcohol for religious or cultural reasons, that statistics show that alcohol use amongst all young people is declining, and that most young people choose not to drink alcohol. For those who do choose to drink alcohol, whilst all alcohol consumption carries a degree of risk, there are ways to reduce the risk of harm.

Give students **Resource 1: Alcohol patterns** and ask them to read the first part of the sheet that outlines what can be considered lower risk drinking and explain that whilst not drinking alcohol at all is the healthiest choice, drinking alcohol in a lower risk way reduces the chance of illness or injury, including lower risks of alcohol-related cancers, and short-term injuries or misjudgement of risks than higher risk drinking habits.

Next, ask students to draw or write the number of alcoholic drinks that an adult could drink to be considered a 'lower-risk' drinker in the table on the lower half of the sheet using the information they have read. They should also decide on three key points they think would keep the risks to an adult low. For example, they may wish to consider how much or how often a person may want to drink or if there are further strategies to lower the risks present while drinking.

Take feedback, drawing out key learning:

- It is important to note that advice from the Chief Medical Officer states that an alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest choice.
- For adults, drinking fewer than 14 units of alcohol per week constitutes lower-risk drinking and this should be spread over time rather than all on one or two days.
- Lower-risk drinking reduces the risk of short-term injuries or illness such as accidents or misjudgements of risk that lead to injury or illness, and alcohol poisoning. It also reduces the long-term risks to health such as liver or heart disease, some cancers and damage to the brain or nervous system.
- Limiting the amount of drinking in one session, for example over an evening, also lowers the risk of short-term health risks including accidents and vulnerability to others. Students may also add that a person can ensure they have a plan to get home and stay in a group with people they trust, as a way to reduce vulnerability and risk.
- Students may have suggested a range of further strategies to lower a person's risk whilst drinking. For example, if a person chose to have multiple drinks in one session, then spacing drinking alcohol with non-alcoholic beverages, can reduce the number of alcoholic drinks consumed in total and can give the body time to process the alcohol as it slows drinking. However, students should understand that this does not prevent the effects of alcohol completely.
- Students may have also identified that eating food with drinking alcohol could be a strategy used to reduce risk in relation to drinking, as it allows the body to process alcohol gradually by slowing the alcohol entering the bloodstream. Students should understand that this will not negate the effects of alcohol and eating food after heavy drinking will not 'sober up' a person who is drunk. With higher levels of alcohol, it could also increase risk as the person may be sick which could present a choking hazard.



Support: Give students **Resource 1a: Alcohol patterns and risks** and ask them to comment on what is helpful and what is risky about each pattern. They should also circle the pattern they think is lowest risk.

Continue the conversation (Slides 16–25, 10 mins)

Explain that drugs such as cannabis also have an impact on physical and mental health. Give pairs of students **Resource 2: Continue the conversation** and ask them to match each opinion (on the first page) with the correct response (on the second page).

Ask students to share any opinions or responses they found surprising and reinforce the key learning given in the responses on the resource.



Support: Give students **Resource 2a: Find the response** to match the replies, as this has reduced and simplified language.



Challenge: Ask students to draft a brief social media post of no more than two sentences that a charity could post to address one of the opinions and its response shared in the activity.

Reflection and endpoint assessment

Reflection and endpoint assessment (Slides 26–27, 10 mins)

Ask students to revisit their mind maps from the baseline assessment and – using a different coloured pen – edit their ideas from the start of the lesson and add any new learning on the health risks associated with occasional and problematic substance use and how to challenge misconceptions about cannabis and alcohol use. Collect these and use them to check progress and assess future learning needs.

Take feedback from students on the aspects that they hadn't considered. Are there any general themes to the risks they had missed? This may inform future planning on drug education.

Finally, ask students to reflect privately about the lesson and on a piece of paper, ask them to:

- write something unrelated to the lesson such as “What is one positive thing that has happened this week so far?”
- write any questions they still have based on the lesson

This will ensure all students are writing and do not have to be seen to be asking a question.

Collect all responses in the question box or envelope and respond to them in the following lesson.

Signposting support

Signposting support (Slide 28, 5 mins)

Remind students that they can access support at home, and both in school (through their form tutor, pastoral lead, or school nurse) and out of school, through local and national organisations. Share the following websites and phone numbers with students:

- Childline - www.childline.org.uk 0800 1111
- Talk to Frank - www.talktofrank.com/get-help 0300 1236600

Extension activity

Information campaign (Slide 29)

Students design a campaign to help young people access accurate information related to cannabis and alcohol use. This could include posters, a 60-second news bulletin or a script for a short advert.