



Family Guide To Understanding Substance Abuse In The Adult Person With Mental Retardation And Developmental Disabilities (MR/DD)

Substance abuse is a common problem in all segments of American society. Substance abuse can include misuse of legal substances such as alcohol or nicotine, abuse of prescription medications such as Ritalin and the use of illegal drugs such as marijuana or methamphetamine. Substance abuse can occur in all age groups of persons with mild mental retardation. Individuals with moderate or severe retardation would not be expected to have access to alcohol, prescription items, or street drugs. Substance abuse in persons with moderate to severe retardation suggests that some person is abusing or neglecting these individuals by allowing them access without adequate supervision.

Individuals with mild retardation can abuse many substances but alcohol and cigarettes are the most common problem. Street drugs are readily available to anyone with sufficient money to purchase these illegal drugs. Ecstasy, methamphetamine, cocaine and marijuana are common drugs of abuse in younger patients. Older patients are more likely to abuse alcohol.

Family caregivers should suspect substance abuse anytime a person with mental retardation develops a significant change in behavior, activities, or function. All substances of abuse alter brain function. Persons with mental retardation already have problems with brain function and the use of substances will only complicate these problems.

Alcohol abuse can produce problems at school or work. Alcohol can produce new behavioral problems, such as fighting, anger, hostility, or impulsive behavior. The new occurrence of psychiatric symptoms, such as depression or psychosis, may be produced by abuse of methamphetamine.

Prescription medication abuse is common in all segments of society. Persons with mental retardation may receive stimulants, such as Ritalin, to promote intellectual function. Stimulant abuse and misuse of pain medications, such as narcotics, are common forms of prescription abuse in all persons.

Family caregivers can monitor for potential substance abuse by observing behavior, attitude, and performance. New problems with intellectual performance, new psychiatric symptoms, or personality changes may suggest unrecognized substance abuse in persons with mild mental retardation. Urine drug screens can be performed to check for the presence of drugs. Persons with substance abuse require treatment and continued monitoring to assure they avoid future problems.