Tobacco, alcohol, other drugs, gambling, and gaming in Belgium

Effects, risks, and laws

Introduction

Everyone comes into contact with drugs from time to time. Maybe you have friends with a son who sometimes smokes a joint. There might be someone in your family who has problems with alcohol. You know someone who wants to quit smoking. Or maybe you've taken a sleeping pill before? What do these substances actually do to you?

Drugs can work in three ways:

- **Stimulants** (speed, cocaine, khat, etc.) pep you up. People take these drugs to dance, exercise or work for longer. They also don't feel as tired as quickly. The heart rate accelerates.
- **Narcotics** (alcohol, sleeping pills, painkillers, heroin, etc.) give a sense of calm. People feel less fear and pain. The heart rate slows down.
- **Hallucinogens** (ecstasy, LSD, etc.) make you see, feel, and hear the world very differently. Feelings are also assessed differently. For example, you can get angry or happy about something that isn't really there.

Some drugs cause a mix of these three effects.

So one drug can have very different effects from another. Some things are the same for all drugs, though. For example, all drugs can trigger a strong craving that makes you want to feel the effects again and again. So you want to use more often. With some drugs, you also need more and more to get the same effect. Anyone who feels that craving to use again is mentally addicted. This can happen with all drugs, and even with certain behaviours, such as gambling or gaming. You can also become physically addicted to some drugs. Then you get sick if you don't use regularly or if you stop using.

Go straight to the information on:

- Tobacco
- E-cigarettes
- Alcohol
- Medication
- Cannabis
- Speed & cocaine
- Nitrous oxide
- Gambling
- Gaming

Tobacco

“I smoke cigarettes. That doesn’t bother anyone around me, does it?”

Yes, it actually does. Tobacco is different from most other drugs in this regard. The smoke is not only harmful to your own body. It is also very unhealthy for the people around you because they too are breathing in this smoke. Children and pregnant women, among others, are very sensitive to this.

Effect

Tobacco contains the substance nicotine. That substance first makes you feel calm and relaxed after smoking. After a while, the nicotine is flushed out of your body. Then you just start feeling restless and uncomfortable. What do you want at that moment? Another cigarette! Your body is then addicted to nicotine.

Smoking is also habit-forming. You constantly feel the craving to smoke in certain situations. For example, you always light up a cigarette when waiting for the bus, during a night out, over coffee, before bed, etc.

Nicotine is very addictive. So quitting smoking isn’t easy.

Risk

If you smoke regularly, you are at greater risk of serious diseases such as lung disease or cardiovascular problems. Tobacco smoke contains many substances that are toxic and carcinogenic. Smoking also smells foul and causes bad breath. It reduces your fitness.

Being addicted to tobacco is also an expensive habit. Cigarettes cost a lot of money.

Smoking while pregnant is very harmful to your unborn child.

The law

It is illegal to sell tobacco to anyone under the age of 18 in Belgium. Online sales are also prohibited.

Smoking is not allowed in enclosed public spaces such as trains, restaurants, cafes, schools, and workplaces. You are also not allowed to smoke outside in some places, including at amusement parks, zoos, playgrounds, petting zoos, recreational areas, or sports fields. In addition, you cannot smoke within 10 metres of the entrance or exit of care centres, hospitals, nurseries, schools, and libraries.

E-cigarettes

"An e-cigarette is healthy, right? Those lovely flavours and scents can't be dangerous, can they?"

Yes, they can. The e-cigarette is certainly not healthy and is potentially harmful. But for adult smokers, vaping (using an e-cigarette) is less harmful than continuing to smoke cigarettes. If you're a minor or an adult who doesn't smoke, then starting to vape is definitely not a good idea, as vaping is always worse for your health than not vaping.

Effect

Most e-cigarettes contain nicotine. This is the substance that makes you addicted to smoking or vaping. When the nicotine is flushed out of your body, you don't feel good, and you want another cigarette or want to use your e-cigarette again.

Risk

Besides nicotine, the e-cigarette also contains other substances, such as flavourings. We do not yet know how harmful these substances are when inhaled.

The most harmful components released when smoking tobacco, such as tar and carbon monoxide, are not in e-cigarettes. This is because no tobacco is burnt in e-cigarettes. E-cigarettes heat and vaporise a liquid, which makes them less harmful to your health than smoking tobacco. But we strongly advise people who do not smoke, have never smoked, and do not use nicotine today to not use e-cigarettes in any manner.

If you smoke, you can use the e-cigarette to help you quit. But don't smoke and vape at the same time – that won't improve your health. If you switch completely to vaping and stop smoking regular cigarettes, it is best to stop vaping at some point as well. Use the e-cigarette long enough to get off tobacco and stay off, but not for too long. The long-term effects of vaping are still unknown.

Also, do not use an e-cigarette if you are pregnant.

The law

It is illegal to sell e-cigarettes to anyone under the age of 18 in Belgium. Online sales are also prohibited.

Vaping is not allowed in enclosed public spaces such as trains, restaurants, cafes, schools, and workplaces. You are also not allowed to vape outside in some places, including at amusement parks, zoos, playgrounds, petting zoos, recreational areas, or sports fields. In addition, you cannot vape within 10 metres of the entrance or exit of care centres, hospitals, nurseries, schools, and libraries.

Alcohol

“My husband occasionally drinks beer. There is less alcohol in a glass of beer than in a glass of whisky, right?”

No, there is no difference if you pour it into the ‘right’ glass. Beer in a beer glass, whisky in a whisky glass, wine in a wine glass: there is the same amount of alcohol in each. We call these standard drinks. There are two exceptions. Specialty beers contain more alcohol. And at home, people tend to pour fuller glasses than they would get in a bar.

Effect

Alcohol numbs the brain. A few glasses of alcohol make you feel cheerful and relaxed. You feel more confident and find it easier to talk. But if you drink more, your concentration drops and your reactions slow down. You might make poor decisions. With even more alcohol, walking, seeing, or speaking becomes harder. Your emotions can also change quickly.

Elderly people and women are generally more sensitive to the effects of alcohol.

Risk

If you drink a lot of alcohol, you may suffer from a hangover the next day. You have a headache. You feel nauseous. Sometimes you don’t remember what happened.

When you are drunk, you take more risks. You may become aggressive more easily and pay less attention. That makes it dangerous to drive or work.

Combining alcohol and other drugs is dangerous. If you drink alcohol often or heavily, it affects your whole body. It is bad for your liver, your brain, and your heart. You are more likely to get cancer. You can become physically and mentally addicted.

Drinking alcohol while pregnant is harmful to your unborn child. It’s also best not to drink when you are breastfeeding.

How do you limit the risks of alcohol? Young people under 18 are best off not drinking at all. If you are an adult, do not drink more than 10 standard drinks of alcohol per week. Limit the number of glasses per day, and have some days without alcohol. The less you drink, the lower the risk.

The law

It is illegal to serve, sell, or offer alcohol to anyone under the age of 16. Beer and wine are allowed from 16 years of age. Spirits (like whisky, rum or vodka), cocktails, and mixed drinks (like breezers) are only allowed from the age of 18.

Medication

“I told my friend that I suffer from stress. She gave me a pill that helped her deal with her stress. Will I feel better now?”

Everyone is different. Maybe a pill works well for your friend, but not for you. Do not take medication from anyone else or share your own with other people. Only a doctor can determine the right medication and treatment.

Effect

Sometimes you need medication for sleep, stress, anxiety, or sadness. There are many different types of these medications. They change the way you think, act, and feel. This can help you sleep better, feel calmer, or improve your mood. But they can also make you feel drowsy and affect your concentration.

Risk

Every medicine can have side effects, whether you take them for a short or long time. Side effects may vary from person to person. It depends on the sensitivity and health of those taking the medicine. You can become addicted to some of these medications if you use them often and in high doses. You may feel like you can’t do without them, and you might feel unwell when you stop.

Stress, sleep problems, anxiety, or sadness are signs that something is not right. Medication reduces the symptoms but does not solve the cause of your problem. Discuss this with your doctor. Perhaps you can also address your problems or complaints without medication.

Buying medicine on the internet or on the street is dangerous. You can never be sure what’s in it. So always buy your medications from the pharmacy.

The law

You can’t just go out and buy medications for stress, sleep, anxiety, or sadness. This can only be done at the pharmacy with a doctor’s prescription. Every medicine comes with a patient information leaflet. It explains, in plain language, how to use it safely.

Follow the advice from your doctor and pharmacist.

Cannabis

(Hash/Marijuana)

"Do the joints my friend smokes really help with stress?"

Those joints relax you for a while, but they don't take away the problems. Cannabis also strengthens the mood of the moment. If your friend is not feeling well, they are going to feel even worse after smoking.

Effect

You become relaxed and calm. You feel things differently. Colours become more intense, music more beautiful. Cannabis strengthens your mood, even if you're not feeling well.

Smoking a joint makes you feel like eating and makes your heart beat faster. Your arms and legs feel heavy. Your eyes turn red. The effects last for two to four hours. The effects are similar when using cannabis in a vape pen (cannabis vapes).

Some people put cannabis in their food or drinks. In that case, the effects can last twice as long, but they are also less predictable, since it is hard to know exactly how much you have consumed.

Risk

You sometimes forget things you have just done. So cannabis and studying do not mix. Cannabis use affects your concentration and alertness. This is dangerous if you have to work or operate a vehicle or machine.

Sometimes the effects are different from what you expected. You might feel sick or anxious. If you use cannabis often, you can become irritable and have trouble sleeping.

Using cannabis to forget your problems isn't a good idea. It might feel like you're doing better, but after a while you realise not much has changed. It makes it harder to think clearly. Meanwhile, your problems may be getting worse.

In Belgium, cannabis is often smoked in a joint. Such a joint usually contains tobacco as well. This means you inhale more tar than with a cigarette. This is harmful to the lungs. You can also become addicted to tobacco through smoking joints.

Those who use cannabis vapes do not inhale tar. Other risks do come into play here: it is still unclear how harmful cannabis vapour is for the lungs. Sometimes vapes are contaminated or poorly labelled. You are never sure what the composition is.

The law

Cannabis is illegal. Using, possessing, and selling it are punishable by law. The police are sometimes less strict concerning people over the age of 18 who carry or use a small amount of cannabis for their own use. This is why some people think cannabis is allowed in Belgium. But that's actually incorrect.

Speed & cocaine

“Can you party longer with speed and cocaine without any problems?”

Speed and cocaine are stimulants. They are usually powders that people snort. But some speed and cocaine can also be smoked. For a while, they make you feel like you have a lot of energy. But when they wear off, you are exhausted. Then you don’t feel like partying anymore.

Effect

Stimulants give you an enormous amount of energy. You are less tired and want to keep going. Stimulants increase your heart rate. You get less hungry. You feel very happy. It seems like you can handle more things at once. You feel confident and talk a lot.

Risk

During use, you may experience headaches, abdominal pain, increased body temperature, palpitations, hyperventilation, and muscle cramps.

The extra energy comes not from the drug, but from your body. That is why you are extra tired after using it. You no longer feel like doing anything.

Speed and cocaine are made in illegal labs. Plus, you can never be entirely sure what is in illegal drugs. That makes the risk even greater.

The effect of stimulants is often strong. You can quickly become addicted to them. The craving to use again can become very strong. After a while, it becomes very difficult to get on without these drugs. If you manage to quit, it also remains difficult not to start again.

The law

Speed and cocaine are illegal. Using, possessing, and selling these drugs are punishable by law.

Nitrous oxide

“Nitrous oxide is used in whipped cream canisters! It shouldn’t do much harm then, right?”

It is true that nitrous oxide is used in all sorts of ways, even in the medical world. But that does not mean there are no risks involved. Even if you only use it once, the side effects can be dangerous in certain situations.

Effect

Nitrous oxide is inhaled and therefore acts quickly. The effect is best compared to a drunken feeling. You feel elated and often have fits of laughter or giggles.

Nitrous oxide relaxes your muscles, making you feel sluggish. You also feel less pain. What you hear and see may be distorted by intoxication.

How strongly narcotic nitrous oxide affects you depends on the dose. Consciousness decreases more sharply if a lot of gas is inhaled at once, or if it is used several times in quick succession.

Risk

There are a lot of risks involved in using nitrous oxide. Side effects you may feel immediately after one-time use are dizziness, nausea, headache, anxiety, and fainting.

Some of these side effects may put yourself or others at risk. If you pass out, you can hurt yourself badly. Those who ride a bicycle or drive a car while dizzy are more likely to have a traffic accident.

Other side effects are only seen with frequent and heavy use of nitrous oxide. This includes tingling in the hands or feet, or having no feeling in the hands or feet. These side effects are a sign of nerve damage. You can be paralysed by this.

The law

Nitrous oxide may only be sold if it is intended for medical or technical use (for example, for use in whipped cream dispensers). Only adults may buy nitrous oxide for this type of use. The sale of nitrous oxide to minors is always prohibited.

The use and possession of nitrous oxide as an intoxicant, by both minors and adults, is subject to fines.

Gambling

“If I gamble, how much chance do I have of winning?”

Gambling is playing with money. You can win or lose money. Whether you win or lose is purely a matter of chance. You don’t have any control over the outcome. The chances of winning are always smaller than the chances of losing.

Effect

The chance to win or lose (a lot of) money makes gambling very exciting. This creates a feeling of thrill. The more money you bet, the more exciting it gets. This excitement can give you a kind of rush, similar to the effects of certain drugs.

Risk

You can become mentally addicted to gambling and to the excitement you feel because of it.

You then lose control over your gambling behaviour. That’s how you can get into money problems. And that can lead to problems in your relationships, at work, and with your health. Gamblers in debt often hope to resolve their debts by gambling even more. This will get them into even more trouble as they suffer more losses.

The law

Gambling is allowed in Belgium, but there are strict rules. It is only allowed in a limited number of businesses licensed for this purpose. Casinos, slot machine halls, betting shops, and gambling sites are only open to people over the age of 21. You can also only gamble on slot machines in pubs if you’re 21 or older. You must insert your ID card at the start of a game. Participating in National Lottery games is allowed if you’re 18 or older (except for sports betting, for which you have to be 21).

People can protect themselves from gambling problems by having themselves banned from entering casinos, slot machine halls, betting shops, and online gambling sites. You can request this through the Gambling Commission. Family or other ‘stakeholders’ (like someone’s partner) can also request such an entry ban.

Gaming

“Sometimes I forget everything around me when I’m gaming. Then I suddenly play for a lot longer than I intended.”

Gaming is a fun hobby. A game can be so much fun that time passes quickly. But some people game so much that they do nothing else, which could cause problems.

Pros

Gaming does have benefits. It’s fun and you can learn a lot with it, such as language or maths. Games also provide relaxation. They help you escape from ordinary life for a while. If you play online, you can make new friends. You get more confident as you get better and better at your game, and you get appreciation from other players.

Cons

Sometimes games also have effects that are not fun. You may find it hard to stop playing and do almost nothing else than gaming. This makes you feel less fit because you move less. You might feel angry or lonely at times. You no longer meet up with friends, you sleep poorly, and are tired. Sometimes, gaming causes problems in relationships, or leads to fights and issues at school or work. Sometimes you spend more money than you intended in the game, for example by purchasing skins, money, weapons, and more.

Too much gaming?

If you often suffer drawbacks from gaming, you are probably gaming too much. It is important to maintain a good balance. Do other things besides gaming, such as hanging out with friends, playing sports, and other hobbies. You will sleep better if you stop gaming one hour before you go to sleep and don’t bring screens (like your phone, a TV or a laptop) into the bedroom. When you play, take a break after a maximum of one hour.

If drug use, gambling, or gaming becomes a problem

"Everyone I know drinks alcohol. I also know people who smoke cannabis and bet on sports. That's not a problem, is it?"

Most people use a drug at one time or another. Just think of the people who drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or take painkillers. Many young people are also gaming. Most people do that to get something positive out of it. For example, they do it to have fun with friends. Or because they like it. Most of them do not get themselves or others into trouble.

However, this doesn't work for everyone. Some cannot stop at the occasional glass of beer, at that one social cigarette, or after that night at the bingo booths.

- Some people use too much or too often. This can put their own safety and that of others at risk in various ways. For instance, it can lead to traffic accidents, fights, and other dangerous situations. Or they lose so much money gambling that they can't make ends meet.
- For some, it also leads to addiction. This can cause serious problems with your health. It can also lead to problems in relationships, or to issues at school or work.

Both situations are examples of problematic use. Does this remind you of yourself or someone you know? Then it's best to seek help.

- *"I don't always want to bother my girlfriends with my son's addiction. Now I can tell my story. My doctor is thinking with me about how to convince my son to change his life. That's a relief!"*
  (the mother of a young drug user)

- *"For years, I drank alcohol to feel better. In the end, I had no control over it. I just kept drinking more and more. I am finding my way to a better life with the support of a psychologist."*
  (a single woman)

- *"My son games almost every day until midnight. He no longer wants to go to school and has almost no friends. I'm worried about him. Fortunately, my questions were answered easily and quickly on the phone."*
  (a concerned father who called De Druglijn)

As a first and most important step: talk about tobacco, alcohol, medication, gambling, gaming, and drugs. You can do that with your friends, family, or doctor. Everyone sometimes wants good advice or wants someone to listen to their concerns. Don't wait too long to seek help.

You can also seek professional help.

Do you have questions about ***drugs, alcohol, medication, gaming, or gambling?*** If so, you can contact De Druglijn or Infor-Drogues.
This can be done anonymously: you don't have to give your name.

De Druglijn (call, chat, or email)
078/15.10.20
www.druglijn.be
➜ Dutch and English

Infor-Drogues (call or email)
02/227.52.52
permanence@infordrogues.be
www.infor-drogues.be
➜ French

If you have questions about ***tobacco***, then you can contact Tabakstop.
This can be done anonymously: you don't have to give your name.

Tabakstop (call or email)
0800/111.00
www.tabakstop.be
➜ Dutch, French, and English

If you have questions about your ***own drug use*** or that of ***someone close to you***, then you can make an appointment with a professional counsellor. These professionals are bound by professional confidentiality: what you tell them will not be shared with anyone else. This can be done at a Centre for Mental Health (Centrum Geestelijke Gezondheidszorg, CGG) near you, for example.

Sometimes admission is needed to recover from addiction. There are specialised hospitals or organisations where you can stay for a while. Even after admission, professional help usually follows.

Colofon

V.U.: dr. Hendrik Peuskens, Vereniging voor Alcohol- en andere Drugproblemen vzw, VAD, Vanderlindenstraat 15, 1030 Brussel – mei 2025
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