Just say no to drugs

With Britain described as a drug-taking society, it's essential that we become more competent at diagnosing and managing drug-related problems, says Alison Lowe

Drugs have featured in the press a lot recently. This is mainly due to the tragic deaths of two teenagers whose deaths were linked to drug use. The press often get confused with Methadone – a weed killer otherwise known as 'Mi-auw Miao'.

Britain is a drug-taking society; we drink alcohol and take prescription and pharmaceutical drugs for all sorts of reasons. Many drugs, both illegal and those prescribed can be harmful to our mouths. Indeed, it is estimated that about 40 per cent of people take at least one type of medication that can damage the teeth.

Health damage

While it is easy to judge, it is important to remember that far more health problems and drug-related deaths occur as a result of taking legal drugs such as prescribed antibiotics, alcohol and tobacco, than from illegal substances. Nonetheless, regular use of illegal drugs can cause significant health damage.

As a society, we tend to either dismiss concerns about drugs or sensationalise the danger, but neither approach is very helpful. The most important thing is to be well informed – that way you can provide accurate information about drugs because so often our patients receive inaccurate information from their friends. Here is the lowdown on some of the most commonly used drugs:

Cocaine. Often referred to as coke, charlie, blow or nose candy. While cocaine is often snorted, many users prefer to rub the cocaine over their gums, which can lead to inflammation, bleeding and ulceration (particularly labially in the upper anterior region). When mixed with saliva, the drug creates an extremely acidic solution, which leads to erosion and over time, exposure of dentine, which obviously results to erosion and over time, exposure of dentine, which obviously results to erosion and over time, exposure of dentine, which obviously results to erosion. Other side effects include dry mouth, bruxism and jaw clenching.

Ecstasy. Also called ‘E’, the love drug and drug users often将其 described as a Skyrocketing addiction. Meth causes severe tooth decay in a very short time and it has been noted that users lose their teeth abnormally fast due to a combination of side effects. Indeed the term ‘meth mouth’ has been used to describe the extensive damage typically caused by this drug. It is reported to attack the immune system, so users are often more prone to infections such as A.U.G. It is also highly acidic and causes erosion. Other side effects include dry mouth, bruxism and jaw clenching.

Prevention is certainly better than cure especially as restorative dental treatment can be expensive and time consuming. If patients are open about drug use, we can help them to manage the situation. Professional treatment depends on the particular drug and its effect on the teeth and gums but may include:

- Referral to an appropriate cessation service
- Application of topical fluoride and use of fluoride mouthwashes to reduce sensitivity and prevent decay
- Recommending products aimed at limiting the damage caused by erosion, such as Pronamel toothpaste and mouthwash
- Diet advice, for example, sugar-free lollies and diet drinks (preferably non-carbonated) for ecstasy users
- Wearing a night guard to ease the symptoms of bruxism.

It seems that we need to become more competent at diagnosing and managing drug-related problems because it’s possible that for many of our patients, none are the days of getting high naturally.

About the author

Alison Lowe is a dental hygienist based at Cardiff at The Orthodontic Centre, a private practice specialising in implants, orthodontics and cosmetic dentistry. She has won several awards including Hygienist of the Year 2009 and is a columnist for the Hunters Mail. She thoroughly enjoys what she does and is delighted to be contributing to Dental Tribune UK.