# MARIJUANA TALK KIT

*What you need to know to talk with your teen about marijuana*

#MJTalkKit

Partnership™
for Drug-Free Kids
Where families find answers

# INTRODUCTION

**"*When I was a kid…*" doesn't really work when talking with your kids about marijuana today. It's a whole new ballgame.**

Marijuana — legal or otherwise — is a hot topic. It's more important than ever for parents to protect their kids' health and development by addressing this issue early and often.

That's why we created this talk kit. We want to help families navigate through a changing marijuana landscape; one that includes new policies like legalization, as well as new products, like "edible" candies and cookies.

Here, you'll learn how to set the stage to have an open dialogue with your teen — about any issue, but marijuana in particular. Your teens are likely asking you some tough questions and challenging you on the topic of marijuana. We've worked with top experts in health and parenting to help you talk with your teen.

Believe it or not, you are the most powerful influence in your child's life. More than friends. More than TV. More than celebrities. We know you have questions, and we're here to help.

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# THE FACTS / *What do I need to know now about marijuana?*

## What is marijuana?

Marijuana, one of the most often-used drugs in the U.S., is a product of the hemp plant, Cannabis sativa. The main active chemical in marijuana, also present in other forms of cannabis, is THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol). Of the roughly 400 chemicals found in the cannabis plant, THC affects the brain the most. It is a mind-altering chemical that gives marijuana users a high.

## What does it look like?

Marijuana itself is a green or gray mixture of dried, shredded flowers and leaves of the hemp plant.

## What are some terms for marijuana?

Bud, blunt, chronic, dab, dope, ganja, grass, green, hash, herb, joint, loud, mary jane, mj, pot, reefer, sinsemilla, skunk, smoke, trees, wax, weed.

## How is it used?

Many users roll loose marijuana into a cigarette (called a "joint") or smoke it in a pipe or water pipe (called a "bong") or in a cigar (called a "blunt"). A single intake of smoke is called a "hit."

Marijuana can also be mixed into food or brewed as tea and ingested.

In states where marijuana has become legalized, more and more marijuana "edibles" are seen in retail establishments where marijuana is sold, including baked goods and candy that closely or even exactly resemble well-known foods (example: brownies, chocolate, cookies, pizza or gummy bears).

Marijuana can also be vaporized. In addition, there are marijuana concentrates such as hash, wax, tinctures and oil.

Learn more about how marijuana is used at **drugfree.org/drug-guide/marijuana**.

## *Why some teens use*

Teens use marijuana for different reasons, which may include:

- to relax
- to have fun
- to alter their perspective
- to fit in
- to experiment
- to try something new

Some teens see it as not dangerous and easy to get — maybe even easier than alcohol.

## What are the short-term effects of marijuana use?

Short-term effects of marijuana include problems with memory and learning, distorted perception (sights, sounds, time, touch), trouble with thinking and problem solving, loss of motor coordination, increased heart rate and anxiety. These effects are even greater when other drugs are taken mixed with weed.

## What are the potential long-term effects of marijuana use?

Teenagers experience intense feelings due to hormone changes, which is a normal part of development. While most adults have a variety of healthy activities and behaviors that they turn to in order to relieve stress, it's different for teens.

If a teen is using pot as a coping method for anxiety, depression or stress, he is more likely to continue this behavior, because it works (and it works immediately). He gains instant relief and gratification. He may think, "When I feel stressed out, I smoke pot and it relaxes me." Instead of taking time to process and deal with the feeling, he alters it by getting high, which in turn stunts the emotional coping process. The teen's stress tolerance is lowered, because he has not experienced the natural passing of the feeling, and he hasn't found and used a healthy behavior — like sports, hanging out with a friend, playing music, talking to someone about how he feels or reading a book — to aid in coping with the pressure and stress he feels.

This is why regular pot users who start as teens and stop when they are adults may have a difficult time working through emotions. They are essentially learning healthy behaviors and coping skills that they should have acquired years ago.

Marijuana is unlikely to result in permanent disability or death, but too much of the drug in a person's system can have harmful effects, and isn't as benign as some teens want you to believe. Marijuana can increase risk of chronic cough, bronchitis and

*(continued on page 5)*

### *What should I look for in my home?*

In addition to drugs themselves, keep your eye out for rolling papers, cigars and pipes of any kind, as well as small plastic bags, containers and lighters.

If you find something strange and have questions, you can call the Partnership's Parents Toll-Free Helpline, **1-855-DRUGFREE**, for support and more information.

schizophrenia in vulnerable individuals. It also may increase risk of anxiety, depression and a series of attitude and personality changes. These changes can also include poor performance in school, eating and sleeping problems. Marijuana, just like any other drug, can lead to addiction. It affects the brain's reward system in the same way as all other drugs of addiction — and the likelihood of addiction increases considerably for those who start young.

## How do I know if my teen is using?

Teens will be teens. They sleep late, their groups of friends change, they can be moody and they may have on-again, off-again trouble in school. So how do you know when your teen is using marijuana or other drugs? Here are some signs to watch for:

- Declining school work and grades
- Abrupt changes in friends
- Abnormal health issues or sleeping habits
- Deteriorating relationships with family
- Less openness and honesty

What it comes down to is that **you know your teen best**. If something doesn't feel right, it probably isn't.

### *Signs to watch for*

- Declining school work and grades
- Abrupt changes in friends
- Abnormal health issues or sleeping habits
- Deteriorating relationships with family
- Less openness and honesty

# THE RISKS / *Why is marijuana risky for teens?*

## The new marijuana landscape

Marijuana is often one of the first drugs a teen is offered. In fact, 41 percent of teen smokers say they began before the age of 15[i].

National debates on the legalization of marijuana have helped normalize the behavior for many teens. In fact, 78 percent of teens say that they have close friends who use marijuana[ii]. That's why it's important that your child inherently understands that you don't approve of his use of marijuana, in the same way that you don't want him to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol or use other drugs.

The new marijuana landscape doesn't change the fact that all mind-altering substances — including marijuana — are harmful for the still-developing teen brain.

## Marijuana and the teen brain

The parts of the adolescent brain which develop first are those that control physical coordination, emotion and motivation. However, the part of the brain which controls reasoning and impulses — known as the prefrontal cortex. This part of the brain does not fully mature until the age of 25.

It's as if, while the other parts of the teen brain are shouting, the prefrontal cortex is not quite ready to play referee. This can have noticeable effects on teen behavior, such as:

- difficulty holding back or controlling emotions
- a preference for high-excitement and low-effort activities
- poor planning and judgment (rarely thinking of negative consequences)
- more risky, impulsive behaviors, including experimenting with drugs and alcohol

[i] *Partnership Attitude Tracking Study 2013*

[ii] *Ibid*

So during the adolescent years, your teen is especially susceptible to the negative effects of any and all drug use, including marijuana. Scientific evidence shows that marijuana use during the teen years could potentially lower a person's IQ and interfere with other aspects of functioning and well-being.[iii] Even occasional use of pot can cause teens to engage in risky behavior, be taken advantage of, find themselves in vulnerable situations and make bad choices while under the influence — like combining weed and alcohol, driving while high or engaging in unsafe sex.

## Marijuana and alcohol

While some teens may argue that weed is safer than alcohol, research shows that teens don't typically use alcohol OR weed; they use both, often at the same time[iv] — a dangerous combination.

The biggest impact of mixing marijuana and alcohol is the significant increase in impairment in judgment. The level of intoxication and secondary effects experienced can be unpredictable. Some people may be more prone to episodes of lightheadedness and fatigue. Also, because marijuana is an anti-emetic (used to treat nausea and vomiting in medical situations), it may be easier to drink alcohol until dangerously high blood alcohol levels are reached, as the normal body defense of vomiting when drunk may be muted by the marijuana.

### *A doctor's point of view*

*"At our practice we see the gamut. Most teens that we see either have never tried marijuana, or have tried it once or twice but did not like the way it made them feel. We do see, however, some adolescents who smoke marijuana regularly, and we worry about these kids. Many are doing poorly in school, some cannot sleep unless they smoke first, and some have gotten into trouble, either with their parents, their schools or with the police because of smoking, possessing, buying or selling marijuana."*

—Dr. Karen Soren, Associate Professor of Pediatrics and Public Health at Columbia University Medical Center

[iii] *"Persistent cannabis users show neuropsychological decline from childhood to midlife." Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*

[iv] *Partnership Attitude Tracking Study 2013*

# START HERE / *How do I talk with my teen about marijuana?*

Talking to teenagers is difficult to begin with. Talking to them about drugs and alcohol is even harder. As a parent, you are often met with resistance. The good news is there are ways to engage your teen that promote open and positive communication.

## Get in the right frame of mind

Here are some effective tools to set the stage for a conversation about substances:

- **Keep an open mind.** If you want to have a productive conversation with your teen, one thing to keep in mind is that when a child feels judged or condemned, she is less likely to be receptive to your message. We suggest that, in order to achieve the best outcome for you and your teen, try to preserve a position of objectivity and openness. We understand that this is challenging and may take practice.
- **Put yourself in your teen's shoes.** For instance, consider the manner in which you yourself would prefer to be addressed when speaking about a difficult subject. It might be helpful to think about how you felt when you were a teenager.
- **Be clear about your goals.** It may help to write them down. Once you know what you would like to get from the conversation, you can look back at these afterward and review what went right, what went wrong, what goals were met, which ones were saved for a later date and whether you were able to deliver them effectively.
- **Be calm and relaxed.** If you approach your teen with anger or panic, it will make it harder to achieve your goals. If you are anxious about having a conversation with her, find some things to do that will help relax you (take a walk, call a friend, meditate).

### *Sample goals*

- Begin an ongoing conversation about my teen's use
- Gain insight into the pressures she may be facing with drugs
- Express concern and support
- Gauge how she feels about marijuana in general

*(continued on page 9)*

- **Be positive.** If you approach the situation with shame, anger, scare tactics or disappointment your efforts will be counter-productive. Instead, be attentive, curious, respectful and understanding.
- **Don't lecture.** Keep in mind that if you spoke with her about drugs when she was younger, she already knows that you disapprove of her use. To lecture her about this will most likely lead to her shutting down, tuning you out, anger or worse — it could be misinterpreted as you disapproving of her instead of her actions, which can lead to shame and, in turn, more substance use. Throwing your weight around in order to stop something from happening ("You can't, because I'm your parent and I said so") is highly ineffective. Avoid pulling rank if you get frustrated.
- **Find a comfortable setting.** Announcing a sit-down meeting ("We need to have a talk after dinner") will usually be met with resistance, while a more spontaneous, casual approach will lower her anxiety and maybe even your own. Perhaps this means taking a walk with her or and sitting in the yard or park. Look for a place that feels less confined but not too distracting.
- **Be aware of body language.** If your teen is sitting, you want to be sitting as well. If she is standing, ask her to sit down with you. Be mindful of finger-pointing and crossed arms; these are closed gestures, while uncrossed legs and a relaxed posture are open gestures.

## *You matter*

*"Even though your son or daughter might not acknowledge it, you still matter. If a student gets in trouble on campus, we can put them on probation, we can throw them out of housing, but what college students consistently report is that the worst thing we can do to them, the absolute death penalty, is call you."*

—Dr. Donald A. Misch, Medical Director at the University of Colorado, Boulder

## *Try active listening*

**Active listening is a skill that takes practice and is highly effective.[v] Here are some examples of how you can exercise active listening with your teen.**

**Try asking open-ended questions.**
These are questions that elicit more than just a "yes" or "no" response from your teen.

**Try:** "Tell me more about…"

**Be positive.**
Find the positives in a situation, no matter how hard it may seem.

**Try:** "Thank you for your honesty. I really appreciate it."

**Let your teen know you hear her.**
Reflect back what you are hearing from your teen — either verbatim, or just the sentiment.

**Try:** "I'm hearing that you feel overwhelmed, and that smoking pot relaxes you. Is that right?"

**Sum up and ask questions.**
Show her you're listening the entire time and ask for her input.

**Try:** "Did I get everything? Do you have anything more to add?"

**Ask permission.**
Ask your teen if it's okay to speak with her about her concerns, and whether it's okay that you offer some feedback.

**Try:** "Are you okay with me asking you this? Do you mind if I give you some advice?"

**Offer empathy and compassion.**
Insert understanding and show your teen you get it.

**Try:** "I hear that smoking pot helps your anxiety. I'm sorry you're feeling anxious; I know that's a really difficult feeling. Can we think of some other activities that can help you relax?"

[v] *Third Edition, "Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change," William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick*

## Words to avoid when talking about marijuana (or any issue with your teen)

| AVOID | INSTEAD, USE |
|---|---|
| **BUT**<br>You did well on your report card **but** I know you can work even harder. | **AND**<br>You did well on your report card **and** I know you can work even harder. |
| **SHOULD**<br>You **should** stop smoking pot. | **WANT**<br>I **want** you to stop smoking pot, and I'm here to help you. |
| **BAD**<br>Smoking pot is **bad** for you. | **HARMFUL**<br>Smoking pot is **harmful** for your health and brain. |
| **STUPID**<br>Smoking pot is a **stupid** choice. | **UNHEALTHY**<br>Smoking pot is **unhealthy** for you, and that's why I'm concerned. |
| **DISAPPROVE**<br>I **disapprove** of you hanging out with that group of friends. | **CONCERNED**<br>I am **concerned** about your group of friends and worry that they may not be the best influence. |
| **DISAPPOINTED**<br>I am **disappointed** in you for breaking curfew. | **WORRIED**<br>I am **worried** about your decision to come home past curfew. |
| **CAN'T**<br>You **can't** come home at 11 p.m. on weeknights. | **DON'T WANT**<br>I **don't want** you to come home this late at night anymore. |

### *Be patient*

Remember to be clear about your goals, be positive and offer compassion. These skills take practice, so if the talk doesn't go the way you hoped it might, remember that you will have other opportunities to try them. Have more than one conversation, which will give you many opportunities to get it right and improve upon what didn't go so well the last time.

# WHAT TO SAY / *Ok, now just tell me what to say.*

## Responding to your teen's questions and arguments

Ultimately, there is no "script" for talking with your teen about marijuana. But let's look at some of the arguments your teen might make when you bring up marijuana, and what you can say in response.

### **YOUR TEEN SAYS:** "I know, I know. You've talked with me about this before."

| YOU CAN SAY | HERE'S WHY |
|---|---|
| "I know we've had conversations about drugs before, and I'm sorry if you feel like I'm being a nag." | *Taking responsibility and acknowledging a teen's feelings is an effective way to reduce resistance.* |
| "I want us to be able to discuss topics because I love you and I want to help during these years when you're faced with a lot of difficult choices." | *This statement shows compassion for what he is going through.* |
| "My concern is that things are changing quickly with some states legalizing marijuana, and that's why it's important that we talk about it. Would that be okay?" | *Asking permission is essential to open communication, and makes your teen feel empowered within the dialogue. Be prepared for a possible response of "NO, I don't want to talk." If this happens, ask why. Then have him suggest a time when he would be willing to talk.* |

### **YOUR TEEN SAYS:** [nothing]

| YOU CAN SAY | HERE'S WHY |
|---|---|
| "Do kids at your school talk about marijuana? What do they say?"<br>"Do you know anyone at school who smokes pot? What did she say about it?"<br>"Have you ever been offered marijuana?" | *If you find it hard to get your teen to start talking, try asking questions about her friends or classmates. It may be easier for her to open up about someone other than herself. This can lead her to share her thoughts with you.*<br>*If she doesn't want to talk, remind her that you're there for her when she has things on her mind.* |

## **YOUR TEEN SAYS:** "I'm only doing it once in a while on weekends, so it's not a big deal."

| YOU CAN SAY | HERE'S WHY |
|---|---|
| "I'm happy to hear that this is not something you do on a regular basis. The fact is, using any drug can be harmful at your age because your brain is still developing." | *Even though a parent may want her teen to be completely abstinent, it is imperative to point out the positive — that this is not something that has become a daily habit. This allows the teen to feel like she isn't a bad person or a disappointment.* |
| "I heard you say that you don't think it's a big deal." | *Repeating what you've heard is an example of reflective listening.* |
| "What would make it feel like a big deal to you?" | *This gets your teen to think about the future, what her boundaries are around drug use and what would make it "a big deal." It will give you insight into what is important to her. If use progresses and some of these boundaries are crossed, you can then bring that up at a later date.* |
| "What are some things that keep you from using pot more often than you already do?" | *This is a question that makes your teen think about the reasons why she doesn't want to use pot more often. It allows her to think about what pot use would interfere with if she did it more regularly.* |

## YOUR TEEN SAYS: "Would you rather I drink alcohol? Weed is so much safer."

| YOU CAN SAY | HERE'S WHY |
|---|---|
| "What is going on in your life that makes you feel like you want to do either?" | *This question can easily throw you off course. If it rattles you, posing a question back to him is a good buffer while you think about your answer.*<br><br>*Your response may still be met with "nothing" or another one-word answer, but even the word "nothing" can lead to another supportive statement from you, like "I'm glad to hear there isn't anything going on in your life that makes you want to drink or smoke, and I also know it's unrealistic to think that it isn't going to be offered to you."* |
| "Honestly, I don't want you to be doing anything that can harm you — whether that's smoking pot, cigarettes, drinking or behaving recklessly. I'm interested in knowing why you think weed is safer than alcohol." | *Reminding your teen that you care deeply about his health and well-being, and expressing genuine curiosity about his thought process, is going to help him open up.* |

## YOUR TEEN SAYS: "Marijuana is a plant. It's natural. How harmful could it be?"

| YOU CAN SAY | HERE'S WHY |
|---|---|
| "Not all plants are necessarily healthy or good for you — think about cocaine or heroin or even poison ivy." | *This helps your teen rethink her point.* |
| "I understand that, and I am not suggesting that you're going to spin out of control, or that your life as you know it is going to be over. I would just like to redirect you to the idea that when a person is high, her judgment is not what it ordinarily is and that can be harmful." | *This statement points out that you are reasonable and are not using scare tactics. It also redirects your teen back to your goal of helping her understand the harmful side effects of marijuana.* |
| "People I know who use alcohol or pot on a regular basis are using it to numb themselves or avoid feelings." | *This brings some personal perspective into the conversation, and lets your teen know that you see the effects of substance use in your own life.* |
| "I would much rather you find healthy ways to cope with difficult feelings than turn to drugs. Can we brainstorm activities?" | *Here, you're showing concern, asking permission and promoting collaboration in thinking through healthy alternatives — like yoga, reading or sports.* |

## **YOUR TEEN SAYS:** "But it's legal in some states; why would they make something legal that could hurt me?"

| YOU CAN SAY | HERE'S WHY |
|---|---|
| "It's legal at a certain age, like alcohol. I think that people in these states hope that by 21, they've given you enough time to make your own decision around it. But, let's explore your question in more detail, because it's a good one. Why would states make something legal that could be harmful?" | *Letting your teen know that this is a valid question is important to him being receptive to your answer. Expressing curiosity with an open-ended question keeps the conversation going.* |
| "Let's look at alcohol; it's legal, but causes damage, including DUIs, car accidents and other behavior that leads to jail time. Alcohol can also cause major health problems, including liver problems and car accidents."<br><br>"Cigarettes are also legal, even though they are highly addictive and proven to cause birth defects and cancer. Just because something is legal and regulated doesn't make it safe or mean it isn't harmful." | *Alcohol is a great example of a regulated substance having severely harmful side effects.* |

## **YOUR TEEN SAYS:** "Come on. I only did it once, and I'm totally fine."

| YOU CAN SAY | HERE'S WHY |
|---|---|
| "Okay. Why did you do it only once? Why did you stop, or decide not to do it again?" | *Asking your teen why he isn't doing it more than once can lead to him explaining the reasons for not liking it. He might mention that he was only offered it once.* |
| "Will you tell me about your experience? I'm genuinely curious to know what it was like for you. How did it make you feel?" | *This is an example of an open-ended question that helps you uncover what he may or may not have liked about getting high.* |

## **YOUR TEEN SAYS:** "I don't know what to say when other kids ask me to use."

| YOU CAN SAY | HERE'S WHY |
|---|---|
| "Let's think of some ways that you can turn down the offer that you would be comfortable saying." | *Instead of telling them what to say or do when they are put in an uncomfortable situation, why not ask them? Brainstorming with your teen on how she may get out of a sticky situation will be more effective than telling her. Help your teen think of ways to turn down offers for her own reasons, like "I'm not into that," or "I have a big game tomorrow and don't want to be groggy."* |

## YOUR TEEN SAYS: "But *you* smoked weed when you were younger."

| YOU CAN SAY | HERE'S WHY |
|---|---|
| *If you **did** smoke weed when you were younger* | |
| "I'm not going to pretend like I didn't, and that's why I'm talking to you about this. I will tell you that when I did smoke, my judgment was compromised and the only thing that prevented me from getting into some horrible circumstances was luck." | *You may want to point out some of the negative things that happened to you (or your) friends that you wish didn't.* |
| "And you may be thinking: Well, you did it, and nothing horrendous happened to you. I just want you to understand that these are chances you may take, and they are just that, chances. A lot of harmful things don't happen to you because of your ability to make clear decisions. When you are stoned that ability is very much compromised." | *Here, you're not only being informative but reminding her that marijuana can impact her judgment.* |
| *If you **didn't** smoke weed when you were younger* | |
| "You may or may not believe this, but I never smoked weed when I was a kid. It didn't have a place in my life, and would have interfered with the activities I enjoyed." | *Here, you're explaining why marijuana didn't interest you. Your reasoning may have been that you didn't want it to interfere with the activities you enjoyed; that you didn't feel you needed to use weed to fit in; that you were turned off by the smell; or any other honest reason that kept you from trying marijuana yourself.* |

## A note to parents if you smoke or drink

If you use marijuana or drink alcohol — whether in front of your teen or not — you should anticipate that he is going to call you out on this ("But you smoke weed/drink alcohol!")

Take the time to reflect on, and perhaps reevaluate, your own use — especially if your teen is seeing you use. You may want to consider the effect your behavior has on him.

For instance, if you come home from a long, stressful day and the first thing you do is smoke a joint or pour yourself a drink, you may want to try modeling another behavior for your child (like going for a walk, working out, reading, stretching, deep breathing or something else that helps you unwind). Showing your teen that you use a substance to relieve stress or as a coping skill, can send the wrong message.

Ask yourself why you drink and/or smoke, how often, what time of day and how much you use. These answers are going to affect your credibility with your teen, give you some insight into your own behavior and allow you to evaluate whether your substance use is in any way becoming a harmful and unhealthy coping mechanism.

These are questions only you can answer. Think about them in an honest manner, and reach out for help if you need it. (Consider calling the Partnership's Parents Toll-Free Helpline at **1-855-DRUGFREE**.)

If you don't feel comfortable talking about your substance use with your teen, you can put the focus back on him. You can say, "I'm glad you brought this topic up. I think it's important that we talk about my use as well as yours and, I would like it if we started with your use, why do you feel the need to drink or smoke?"

Try asking your teen, "How does my use affect you? I'm curious, because who you are and how you are feeling is important to me." This invites him to share and ask questions and promotes collaboration.

Consider also asking your teen, "How does knowing that I use pot or drink alcohol make you think differently about your own decisions?" Open-ended questions like these show curiosity, respect and understanding.

And lastly, be sure to express your love and caring about your child's health, development and well-being.

*—Heather Senior, LCSW, Parent Support Network Manager*
*Partnership for Drug-Free Kids*

## *Need help?*

If you feel you need outside help, look for a professional who specializes in addiction. The drug issue will continue to change with the times, but the one thing that will remain constant is the need for information and support when raising a teen. You are the most important, and most powerful, influence in your teen's life. The Partnership for Drug-Free Kids is here to help you all along the way. You can start at **drugfree.org**.

# RESOURCES / *Help from the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids*

## Parents Toll-Free Helpline (1-855-DRUGFREE)

Our Parents Toll-Free Helpline — **1-855-DRUGFREE** — is a nationwide support service that offers assistance to parents and other primary caregivers of children who want to talk to someone about their child's drug use and drinking. Our trained and caring parent specialists speak English and Spanish and have years of experience helping individuals and families prevent and overcome substance abuse problems.

## drugfree.org

At the Partnership's website, **drugfree.org**, we provide families with free, science-based resources to help you deal with teen substance abuse, along with the information you need to understand the ever-changing drug landscape. You can also join a community of other parents and caregivers.

## Special thanks

Special thanks to:

- **Heather Senior**, LCSW
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- **Karen Soren**, MD
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  Columbia University Medical Center

## *Donate to support*

Resources like this talk kit are available free of charge because of generous donors. Please consider making a donation at **drugfree.org**. We appreciate your support.

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