



Teen suicide: What parents need to know

Know the risk factors, the warning signs and the steps you can take to protect your teen.

Is your teen at risk of suicide? While no teen is immune, there are factors that can make some adolescents more vulnerable than others. Understand how to tell if your teen might be suicidal and where to turn for help and treatment.

What makes teens vulnerable to suicide?

Many teens who attempt or die by suicide have a mental health condition. As a result, they have trouble coping with the stress of being a teen, such as dealing with rejection, failure, breakups, school difficulties and family turmoil. They might also be unable to see that they can turn their lives around — and that suicide is a permanent response, not a solution, to a temporary problem.

What are the risk factors for teen suicide?

A teen might feel suicidal due to certain life circumstances such as:

- Having a psychiatric disorder, such as depression, an anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder or oppositional defiant disorder
- Family history of mood disorder, suicide or suicidal behavior
- History of physical or sexual abuse or exposure to violence or bullying
- A substance use disorder
- Access to means, such as firearms or medications
- Exposure to the suicide of a family member or friend
- Loss of or conflict with close friends or family members
- Physical or medical issues, such as changes related to puberty or a chronic illness
- Being lesbian, gay, bisexual or any other sexual minority youth
- Being adopted

Children who have attempted suicide in the past are also at greater risk.

In the U.S., suicide attempts are more common in adolescent girls than boys. But boys are more likely to die by suicide than are girls.

What are the warning signs that a teen might be suicidal? Warning signs of teen suicide might include:

- Talking or writing about suicide — for example, making statements such as “I’m going to kill myself,” or “I won’t be a problem for you much longer”
- Withdrawing from social contact
- Having mood swings
- Increasing use of alcohol or drugs
- Feeling trapped, hopeless or helpless about a situation
- Changing normal routine, including eating or sleeping patterns
- Doing risky or self-destructive things
- Giving away belongings when there is no other logical explanation for why this is being done
- Developing personality changes or being severely anxious or agitated when experiencing some of the warning signs listed above



What should I do if I suspect my teen is suicidal? If you think your teen is in immediate danger, call 911, your local emergency number or a suicide hotline number — such as the Canada Suicide Prevention Service at 1-833-456-4566 in Canada.

If you suspect that your teen might be thinking about suicide, talk to him or her immediately. Don’t be afraid to use the word “suicide.” Talking about suicide won’t plant ideas in your teen’s head.

Ask your teen to talk about his or her feelings and listen. Don’t dismiss his or her problems. Instead, reassure your teen of your love. Remind your teen that he or she can work through whatever is going on — and that you’re willing to help.

Also, seek medical help for your teen. Ask your teen’s doctor to guide you. Teens who are feeling suicidal usually need to see a psychiatrist or psychologist experienced in diagnosing and treating children with mental health problems.

The doctor will want to get an accurate picture of what’s going on from a variety of sources, such as the teen, parents or guardians, other people close to the teen, school reports, and previous medical or psychiatric evaluations.

What can I do to prevent teen suicide?

You can take steps to help protect your teen.

For example:

- **Talk about mental health and suicide.** Don't wait for your teen to come to you. If your teen is sad, anxious, depressed or appears to be struggling — ask what's wrong and offer your support.
- **Pay attention.** If your teen is thinking about suicide, he or she is likely displaying warning signs. Listen to what your child is saying and watch how he or she is acting. Never shrug off threats of suicide as teen melodrama.
- **Discourage isolation.** Encourage your teen to spend time with supportive friends and family.
- **Monitor and talk about social media use.** Keep an eye on your teen's social media accounts. While social media can give teens valuable support, it can also expose them to bullying, rumor spreading, unrealistic views of other people's lives and peer pressure. If your teen is hurt or upset by social media posts or text messages, encourage him or her to talk to you or a trusted teacher. Feeling connected and supported at school can have a strong protective effect.
- **Encourage a healthy lifestyle.** Help your teen eat well, exercise and get regular sleep.



- **Support the treatment plan.** If your teen is undergoing treatment for suicidal behavior, remind him or her that it might take time to feel better. Help your teen follow his or her doctor's recommendations. Also, encourage your teen to participate in activities that will help him or her rebuild confidence.
- **Monitor medications.** Though it's uncommon, some teens might have an increase in suicidal thoughts or behavior when starting antidepressants. But antidepressants are more likely to reduce suicide risk in the long run by improving mood. If your teen has suicidal thoughts while taking an antidepressant, immediately contact the doctor or get emergency help.
- **Safely store firearms, alcohol and medications.** Access to means can play a role if a teen is already suicidal.

If you're worried about your teen, talk to him or her and seek help right away.