



Substance Misuse and Problem Gambling

What Staff Should Know

Substance misuse and problem gambling may impact student-athlete mental and physical health and can sometimes lead to addiction. Understanding the signs of substance misuse and problem gambling can help you recognize and support student-athletes experiencing mental health challenges.

WHAT ARE SUBSTANCE MISUSE AND PROBLEM GAMBLING?

Using substances, such as alcohol or cannabis, and gambling, including betting on sports or playing cards for money, may negatively impact mental health. Substance use and gambling may become problematic if they **lead to challenges in relationships, academics, athletics or other daily activities.**

- **Substance misuse** is when someone uses one or more substances in a way they are not intended. This could include misuse of alcohol, nicotine, prescription medications and/or other substances.
- **Substance-use disorders** occur when someone continues to use a substance despite negative consequences.
- **Problem gambling** occurs when persistent gambling causes distress or impairs daily life, and may lead to Gambling Disorder, a mental health condition.

Consider making it a habit to regularly discuss substance misuse and problem gambling with student-athletes. This helps normalize discussions of mental health and can increase help-seeking behavior.

SHIFTING SUBSTANCE USE PATTERNS



While student-athlete cannabis inhalation has decreased, cannabis ingestion increased by 6% from 2017 to 2023.



Tobacco use among student-athletes is down overall, but vaping nicotine rose 14% between 2017 and 2023.

Recognizing the Signs

Signs of Substance Misuse

- **Changes in a student-athlete's academic or athletic performance** or a lack of energy or motivation.
- **Missing important events**, such as practices or competitions.
- **Pulling away from teammates** or other friends.
- **Changes in appearance** such as red eyes, weight loss or gain, poor grooming or unusual smells.

Signs of Problem Gambling

- A **preoccupation with gambling**, betting or similar activities.
- **Unexplained financial stress**, including asking to borrow money, selling personal items or showing sudden anxiety about finances.
- **Uncharacteristic interest in sports outcomes**, including talking constantly about betting odds or point spreads, or other teams' competitions beyond their typical interest.
- **Missing practices, competitions or other opportunities** because of gambling.



What To Do

If you are concerned about a student-athlete, consider reaching out to offer support.

- **Set up a time to talk, considering student-athlete privacy.**
- Go in with an **open mind** – what they're struggling with may surprise you.
- Start from a **place of concern and support**, and let them know what you've seen or heard that's causing you to be worried.
- **Listen to them without jumping to solutions.** Often, just being **someone who cares** is what matters the most.
- Let them know **they're not alone**, and provide them with resources.
- **Encourage them to reach out to a licensed mental health professional.** Offer to facilitate that connection if they would like you to.

Conversation Starters

You don't need to have all the answers – starting the conversation is often the most important step.

- "I noticed you missed practice a few times. How have things been going for you?"
- "You've seemed a little down lately, so I wanted to check in."



If you or someone you know is in crisis, call, text or chat 988.



Additional resources and guidance on mental health education:



[NCAA Mental Health Best Practices](#)



[NCAA Sports Betting Resources](#)