



NEW YORK
CENTER FOR LIVING

So You Think Your Child Is Using Drugs or Alcohol:

What's Next?



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Introduction

You may be surprised to learn that teens are using fewer drugs than their parents' and grandparents' generations. In 2016, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 33.2 percent of high school seniors drank alcohol in the past month, compared with more than 50 percent in 1996.¹ In the past year, across all grades, use of cigarettes, heroin, inhalants, methamphetamines and synthetic marijuana is the lowest it's been since 1975.

The not-so-good news is that adolescents do still abuse drugs and alcohol. If you're reading this, you probably suspect that your teen is one of them. This is frightening for parents on many levels, and you may feel helpless, hopeless and unsure of what to do.

This eBook will provide you with the information you need to determine whether your child is drinking or using drugs, and what to do about it.



A close-up photograph of a person's face, focusing on their eyes. The person has dark hair and is looking directly at the camera. Their eyes are a light green color. They are holding a dark green, textured fabric up to their face, covering their nose and mouth, leaving only their eyes visible. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the skin and the fabric.

Drug and Alcohol Abuse, Addiction and Dependence

The first step in determining whether your child is engaging in drug and alcohol abuse or is addicted or dependent is to understand what drug and alcohol abuse, addiction and dependence are and how they develop. Understanding the difference between addiction and dependence will help you better support your child throughout treatment and recovery if necessary.

What Is Drug and Alcohol Abuse?

Drug and alcohol abuse is the act of using drugs in a way that causes problems in your life. They may include engaging in risky behaviors, such as having unprotected sex or driving while under the influence, and can lead to serious problems, such as DUI charges or sexually transmitted infections.

Any substance use by teens, including alcohol, nicotine, marijuana and prescription drugs, is considered drug and alcohol abuse. This is because it's illegal for minors to use these substances, and because drugs and alcohol negatively impact developing brains.

Whether or not a child engages in drug and alcohol abuse is a matter of choice, but if drug and alcohol abuse transitions to addiction, choice is no longer a factor.





How Drug and Alcohol Abuse Transitions to Addiction

Heavy drug and alcohol abuse can lead to addiction. Addiction is characterized by compulsive drug use despite negative consequences. It's a brain disease that changes the physical structures and chemical functions of the brain. These changes lead to dysfunctional ways of thinking and behaving, which in turn perpetuate the drug use and can lead to attitudes and actions that seem out of character for your child.

Different drugs affect the brain in different ways, but one thing they all have in common is that they produce a release of dopamine, a feel-good neurotransmitter. Dopamine causes feelings of pleasure, and it's also involved in the memory and learning processes of the brain.

As drug and alcohol abuse escalates, the learning, memory and pleasure centers of the brain are creating important associations between the drug and alcohol abuse and the pleasure it produces. These brain regions begin to communicate with the portion of the brain responsible for planning and executing tasks, and this leads the brain to move from liking the drug to needing it.

Cravings develop, driven by the same mechanisms that drive humanity to eat food and procreate in order to stay alive. As far as the brain is concerned, seeking and using the drug becomes a matter of life and death.

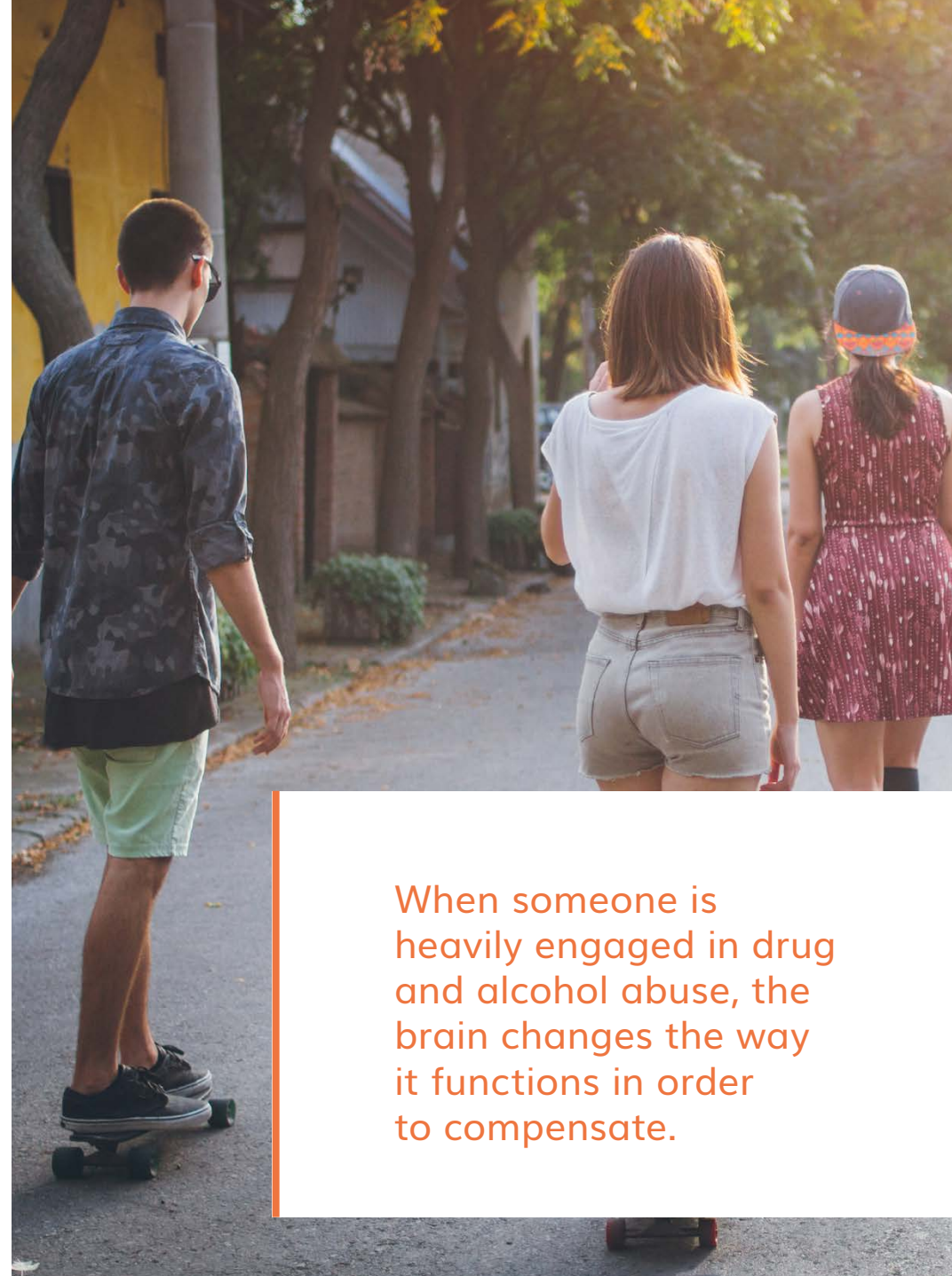


Dependence and How It Develops

Dependence is a physical reliance on drugs, characterized by withdrawal symptoms that set in when a person stops using drugs. When someone is heavily engaged in drug and alcohol abuse, the brain changes the way it functions in order to compensate.

For example, initial alcohol use increases the activity of the calm-inducing neurotransmitter GABA and reduces the activity of the excitability neurotransmitter glutamate. But chronic alcohol use leads the brain to reduce its GABA activity and increase its glutamate activity in order to maintain the right balance of brain chemicals for normal functioning.

The result of these brain changes is tolerance, which is when increasingly larger doses of the drug are required to achieve the desired effect. But as the dose increases, so do the brain changes. At some point, brain function may shift so that it now needs the drug in order to operate "normally." Then, when the drug is withheld, normal brain function rebounds, and withdrawal symptoms set in.



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Why Some Teens Become Addicted and Others Don't

Some teens who use drugs will become addicted, but others won't. The risk of developing an addiction is half genetic and half environmental. Environmental risks factors for addiction include attitudes of family and peers toward drug and alcohol abuse, the availability of drugs at school, poverty and poor social skills.



A person with short brown hair, wearing a dark grey long-sleeved shirt, stands with their back to the camera. Their hands are clasped behind their head, and they are looking out over a blurred cityscape under a hazy sky. The person is standing on a ledge or rooftop.

Signs and Symptoms of Drug Use in Adolescents



Parents often jump to conclusions out of fear. Symptoms of drug use in teens are frightening, and teens can be notoriously secretive about their lives, making it difficult to have a conversation about suspected use. Determining whether your child is using drugs may be a matter of looking for common symptoms of drug use and listening to your parental instincts.

How Substance Abuse, Addiction and Dependence Are Diagnosed

Substance abuse, addiction and dependence are diagnosed under the umbrella of "substance use disorder," using the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Eleven criteria are used to determine whether an SUD is mild, moderate or severe. Meeting two or three criteria denotes a mild SUD, while meeting four or five indicates a moderate disorder. Meeting six to seven criteria indicates a severe SUD.

The criteria are:

1. Using larger amounts of drugs and for a longer period of time than intended
2. Wanting to quit or cut down but finding you're unable to do so
3. Spending significant time seeking, using and recovering from using drugs
4. Experiencing cravings for the drug
5. Being repeatedly unable to meet expectations at home, work or school
6. Continuing to use drugs despite problems caused or made worse by the drugs
7. Losing interest in activities that were once important and enjoyable
8. Engaging in risky behaviors when seeking or using drugs
9. Continuing to use drugs even though they're affecting your health
10. Developing a tolerance, necessitating larger doses to get the same effects
11. Experiencing withdrawal symptoms when you stop taking the drug



Other Symptoms of Drug Use

In addition to the criteria for diagnosing a substance use disorder, your child may exhibit other symptoms of drug use. These include:

- Changes in appetite
- Changes in behavior, such as mood swings or acting withdrawn
- Changes in sleeping habits
- Changes in friends
- Declining academic performance
- Getting into trouble at home, school or with the law
- Deteriorating relationships with family and friends
- The presence of drugs or drug paraphernalia, such as pipes, lighters or baggies
- Enlarged or pinpoint pupils
- Acting disoriented, paranoid or hostile
- Slurred speech
- Frequent headaches or other illnesses
- Exhibiting uncharacteristically high or low energy
- Becoming angry or defensive when confronted with evidence of drug use

If your child is displaying symptoms of drug use, consider making a doctor's appointment for them. Let the doctor know your concerns ahead of time, and ask them to screen your child for substance abuse.



How Substance Use Disorders Are Treated

Once an addiction develops, willpower and good intentions are not enough to end it for the long-term.² Addiction almost always has underlying causes, and professional help is almost always needed. Addiction also leads to skewed thinking patterns and unhealthy behaviors that can grow more dysfunctional with time.



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High-quality addiction treatment takes a holistic approach to rehabilitation that addresses issues of body, mind and spirit.

This whole-person approach will help your child:

- Identify harmful thought and behavior patterns and practice healthier ways of thinking and behaving
- Develop a toolkit of skills and strategies to cope with cravings, peer pressure, high-risk situations, stress and other relapse triggers
- Improve self-awareness, self-esteem and self-confidence
- Develop a non-user identity
- Identify an ideal future and set actionable goals to achieve it
- Identify purpose and meaning in a life without drugs
- Learn to relax and have fun without drugs
- Repair damaged relationships with friends and family members

Family therapy is central to successful recovery for teens. Family therapy helps to improve communication among family members and restore function to the household. High-quality addiction treatment will include additional programming for family members, such as workshops and support groups.



A man and a woman are sitting on a light-colored sofa in a modern, well-lit living room. The man, on the left, is wearing a light-colored t-shirt and green pants, looking down at a tablet he is holding. The woman, on the right, is wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans, looking at a piece of paper she is holding. In the background, there is a wooden shelf with books and a small potted plant.

What to Do

**If Your Suspicions of Teen
Drug Abuse Are Confirmed**

If your suspicions are confirmed and you learn that your family is experiencing teen drug abuse, taking a measured approach to solving the problem will result in the best outcome. Panicking won't change anything, and it will likely make teen drug abuse worse. Staying calm and level-headed will help you approach the problem carefully and mindfully.

Here are four basic steps to take when you learn that your child is engaging in teen drug abuse.

1. Learn everything you can about the drug being abused.

Learning about the drugs your child is taking will arm you with information you can use when you talk to them about the abuse. Find out all you can about the drug, including how it affects brain function, the effects it has on mood, its withdrawal symptoms and short-term and long-term side effects.





2. Talk to your child.

It's important to approach the conversation from a place of love and to remain calm no matter what. Set your fear and anger aside, and stay focused on what you want for your child moving forward.

These tips will help ensure a productive conversation:

- Don't have the talk when your child is under the influence.
- Sit down for the conversation. Ask your child to turn off their phone while you talk.
- Start the conversation with an expression of love.
- Present your evidence or suspicion of teen drug abuse, and encourage your child to be honest with you.
- Be prepared for your child to react with denial, anger or hostility or—if you have your own history of drug or alcohol use—turning the tables.
- If the conversation becomes too heated, end it—for now. Try again later.
- Don't condemn or give your child a guilt trip for teen drug abuse.
- Try to find out why your child uses drugs. Is it because they have anxiety or depression? Because they feel pressured or want to fit in? Because they like the way they make them feel?
- Make an effort to understand where they're coming from.
- Be honest about any addiction that runs in your family. A family history of addiction increases your family's risk of teen drug abuse, and it can serve as a cautionary tale as well as help to de-stigmatize addiction.





3. Find a high-quality treatment program.

Your child doesn't have to be addicted to drugs to benefit from therapy. But if they are addicted, treatment will be essential for ending the drug abuse and preventing a relapse. Choosing the right treatment program for your child will produce the best possible outcomes.

A high-quality treatment program will:

- Use evidence-based treatment therapies
- Create an individualized treatment plan for your child
- Involve the whole family in treatment
- Adhere to the National Institute on Drug Abuse's Principles of Effective Treatment³
- Have a fully licensed and trained staff
- Have comfortable, safe and welcoming facilities
- Offer an aftercare plan once treatment is complete

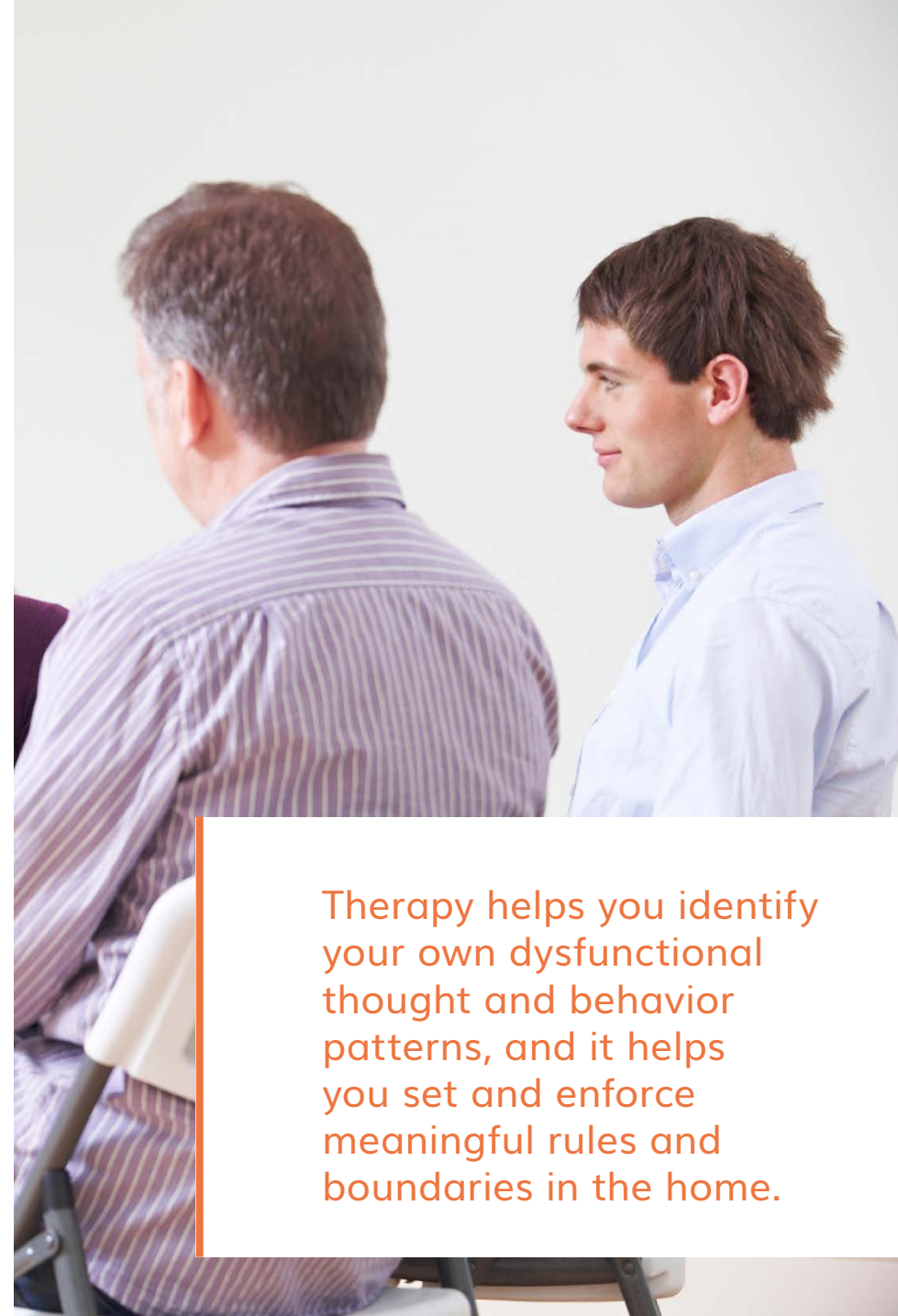


4. Get support, and engage in therapy.

Addiction is a family disease.⁴ It affects every member of the household and can lead to dysfunctional coping skills as the family tries to maintain normalcy despite the unsettling effects of teen drug abuse. When your child enters recovery, the whole family is in recovery.


Joining a support group for friends and family members of addicted individuals provides you with moral support as your family works to end teen drug abuse, repair the damage and improve family functioning. A support group gives you and other family members a place to vent negative emotions, ask questions and celebrate milestones. Other families going through similar circumstances with teen drug abuse share tips, strategies and resources for helping your child successfully recover.

Individual therapy for family members can also make a big difference in your child's recovery from teen drug abuse. Therapy helps you identify your own dysfunctional thought and behavior patterns, and it helps you set and enforce meaningful rules and boundaries in the home.



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The Role of Family in Addiction Counseling:

**How to Support Your Child
in Treatment and Beyond**



A large body of research shows the importance of family in addiction counseling. Family involvement improves the chances of successful recovery. Strong support from the family during recovery is a major factor in preventing a relapse.

Here are some essential ways to support your child during and after treatment.

Learn everything you can about addiction, recovery and relapse. The more you understand about how addiction develops, its common underlying causes, how it's treated and what successful recovery entails, the better equipped you'll be to fully and effectively support your child.

Get involved in your child's treatment. Take advantage of family therapy and other family programming during treatment. Your involvement in family addiction counseling is critical, and the more engaged you and your child are in the treatment process, the better the outcomes of treatment.

Continue with counseling and support after treatment. Once treatment is complete, the aftercare plan for your child will include ongoing therapy and participation in a family addiction counseling support group. Family members should continue engaging with professional family addiction counseling and individual therapy. At this point, you will have your own strategies and resources to share with families who are just starting their own recovery journey.

Know the signs of relapse. Relapse doesn't happen overnight. Relapse begins weeks or months before someone in recovery actually uses again.⁵ It occurs in three predictable stages, each with its own signs and symptoms. Know the stages, signs and symptoms of relapse, and stay vigilant for them.





Understand relapse. Relapse is no longer considered to be a catastrophic event, and it doesn't mean that family addiction counseling didn't work. Experts regard relapse as a normal and expected part of recovery. Relapse rates for addiction are similar to those of other chronic diseases like diabetes or heart disease, with around 40 to 60 percent of people in recovery relapsing at some point.⁶

Relapse is an indication of a missing skill, and identifying and developing that skill will get the individual back on track. Approaching a relapse with a positive attitude will ensure your child gets back to recovery quickly, more motivated and better equipped to stay abstinent.

Promote self-care. A lack of self-care is one of the most important predictors of relapse. Make sure your child eats a healthy diet and gets adequate sleep and plenty of exercise. Help your child reduce stress, and encourage them to cope with stress, cravings and triggers in healthy ways.

Get your teen into a routine. Once treatment is complete, a routine can help your child get through the challenging early weeks and months of recovery. It can help ensure your teen eats regularly, exercises and gets enough sleep. Include plenty of time for fun and relaxation.



Prevent isolation and boredom. Isolation and boredom are major factors for relapse. Don't let your child hole up in their room for hours on end, and make sure they have plenty of activities to keep them busy during early recovery.

Encourage healthy hobbies. Healthy hobbies are important in recovery. Hobbies promote enjoyment, stress relief and relaxation and help prevent boredom and isolation. A hobby can also help your child develop healthy relationships with other non-users as well as bring a higher sense of purpose and meaning to their life.

Have fun with your child. Spend quality time with your child, having fun or just relaxing. Doing so will improve your relationship with your child and help increase accountability. It will also help reduce family stress.

Hold on to hope. Hope is the very foundation of recovery.⁷ Hope is the belief that a better future is possible. There will be setbacks in recovery, and maintaining positivity and holding on to hope will be essential for weathering them. Let your child know you believe in a happy, healthy future for them. Let them know that you believe they will recover for the long-term and enjoy a fulfilling life without drugs.



Recovery is a process of change from the inside out that leads to better physical and mental health, well-being and quality of life. Family addiction counseling is an important tool for recovery. It's a holistic evolution of mind, body and spirit that leads to personal growth and re-defining oneself.

Recovery happens, and it can happen for your family.



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Located in Manhattan, NY, New York Center for Living is a 501(c)(3) non-profit providing addiction and mental health care for adolescents, young adults and families since 2007. Built on the conviction that addiction is a disease of the family rather than the individual, New York Center for Living believes in the importance of early intervention, peer support networks and strong family relationships for successful treatment outcomes.

New York Center for Living specializes in treatment, education, assessment and referral and is a valuable resource for anyone searching to learn more about addiction and mental health. Our team of experts in psychiatry, social work, substance abuse, nutrition, academia and the wellness sciences provide an evidence-based and holistic approach to combating addiction.

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