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The twentieth century saw a remarkable upsurge of research on drugs, with major advances in the treatment of bacterial and viral infections, heart disease, stomach ulcers, cancer, and mental illnesses. These, along with the introduction of the oral contraceptive, have altered all of our lives. There has also been an increase in the recreational use and abuse of drugs in the Western world. This Very Short Introduction gives a non-technical account of how drugs act on the body and how therapeutic drugs are developed and tested, then goes on to review both legal (prescription, alcohol, nicotine, and caffeine) and illegal drugs, and discuss current ideas about why some drugs are addictive, and whether drug laws need reform.