

# Substance Abuse and Addiction

Addiction is a serious illness and can ruin health, finances, relationships, and careers. The abuse of drugs and alcohol is a leading cause of preventable illnesses and premature death in our society. The importance of substance abuse treatment cannot be overstated, and fortunately many effective treatments are available.

## Consequences of Use

### ALCOHOL

Most adults are familiar with alcohol and its effects. Alcohol is a legal drug that can produce pleasant effects with lower amounts, but that can produce dangerous effects with higher amounts. People often drink alcohol during social occasions. Unfortunately, the reckless behavior that often results from excessive drinking is a leading cause of serious injury and accidental death.

Alcoholism is an illness in which a person loses the ability to control their drinking, and it is often associated with the development of problems in work, relationships, and health. It is an illness that tends to run in families and is often associated with depression. Alcoholism can have devastating effects on health, including serious liver damage, greater risk of heart disease, impotence, infertility, and premature aging. Alcohol is the most common cause of preventable birth defects, including fetal alcohol syndrome.

An alcoholic who needs to drink daily should stop their use of alcohol under the supervision of a physician, and may need medication during their withdrawal. There are medications that can help reduce the compelling desire to drink alcohol. Treatment is more successful early in the development of alcoholism than when the illness has been allowed to progress for years.

### MARIJUANA

Marijuana is the most widespread and frequently used illicit drug and is associated with short-term memory loss, accelerated heartbeat, increased blood pressure, difficulty with concentrating and processing information, lapses in judgment, and problems with perception and motor skills.

Years of marijuana use can lead to a loss of ambition and an inability to carry out long-term plans or to function effectively.

### STIMULANTS

Stimulants (cocaine, crack, amphetamines) give a temporary illusion of enhanced power and energy. As the initial elevation of mood fades, depression and other serious medical problems may emerge, including heart attacks, seizures, strokes, and violent, erratic, anxious, or paranoid behavior.

Cocaine use during pregnancy may result in miscarriage, stillbirth, or low birth-weight babies who may be drug-dependent and may later develop behavioral or learning difficulties. Long-term amphetamine abuse can result in psychosis with symptoms that include paranoid delusions and hallucinations.

### HEROIN

Heroin is an opioid drug in the same class as medications like morphine. It can be injected with a needle or inhaled. Heroin produces an intense feeling of pleasure when a person first begins to use it. Occasional use of heroin often progresses to dependence or addiction. Skipping use of heroin for an addicted person can lead to significant withdrawal symptoms such as chills, sweating, runny nose and eyes, abdominal cramps, muscle pains, insomnia, nausea, and diarrhea.

Heroin use during pregnancy may result in miscarriage, stillbirth, premature delivery, or drug-dependent babies. Injecting heroin introduces substances into their bloodstream, that can result in severe damage to the heart, lungs, and brain. In addition, needle sharing spreads diseases—this is the leading cause of all new HIV and hepatitis cases.

Opiate abuse can bring about significant and long-lasting chemical changes in the brain. These changes cause a person to experience intense cravings and negative emotions when they try to stop. Several medications can be used to treat heroin addiction including buprenorphine, methadone and naltrexone.

### HALLUCINOGENS

Hallucinogens are drugs such as LSD (acid) or designer drugs (ecstasy) that are taken orally and cause hallucinations and feelings of euphoria. Dangers from LSD include stressful flashbacks—re-experiencing the hallucinations despite not having taken the drug again, sometimes even years later. Excessive use of ecstasy, combined with strenuous physical activity, can lead to death from dehydration or an exceptionally high fever.

### INHALANTS

Inhalants are breathable chemicals like glue, paint thinner, lighter fluid. They are commonly abused by teenagers because they are easy to obtain and because they produce mind-altering effects when sniffed or "huffed." These chemicals reach the bloodstream very quickly and can be deadly. High concentrations of inhalant fumes can cause heart failure or suffocation and long-term abuse can cause permanent damage to the nervous system.

### SEDATIVES

Sedatives are highly effective medications prescribed by physicians to relieve anxiety and to promote sleep. Harmful effects can occur when taken in excess or without a physician's supervision. Combining sedatives with alcohol or other drugs greatly increases the likelihood of death by overdose. Women who abuse sedatives during pregnancy may deliver babies with birth defects who also may be physically dependent on drugs.

### NICOTINE

Nicotine in tobacco products has addictive properties similar in severity to those of heroin. Quitting is difficult because of the unpleasantness of withdrawal, which involves feelings of irritability, frustration, anger, anxiety, insomnia, and depression. Continued smoking may lead to far more dire circumstances, including lung cancer, heart attacks, emphysema, high blood pressure, and ulcers.

## Treatment

The first step on the road to recovery is recognition of the problem, but often this process is complicated by a lack of understanding about substance abuse and addiction or denial. In these cases, the intervention of concerned friends and family often prompts treatment.

Addiction is a chronic illness like heart disease, high cholesterol or high blood pressure. People with these chronic diseases are prone to relapse. Because substance abuse affects many aspects of a person's life, multiple forms of treatment are often required. For most, a combination of medication and individual or group therapy is most effective. Medications are used to control drug cravings and relieve severe symptoms of withdrawal. Therapy can help addicted individuals understand their

behavior and motivations, develop higher self-esteem, and cope with stress. Other treatment methods may include hospitalization, therapeutic communities (highly controlled, drug-free environments), and outpatient programs.

Self-help groups for substance-abusing individuals (Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous) as well as their family members (AI-Anon or Nar-Anon Family Groups) also are useful in providing support and reinforcing messages learned in treatment.

## Resources

For more information, please contact:

**American Psychiatric Association (APA)**

1000 Wilson Blvd.  
Suite 1825  
Arlington, VA 22209  
703-907-7300  
[www.healthyminds.org](http://www.healthyminds.org)

**National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)**

6001 Executive Boulevard,  
Room 5213  
Bethesda, MD 20892-9561  
301-443-1124  
<http://www.nida.nih.gov/>

**National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)**

5635 Fishers Lane, MSC 9304  
Bethesda, MD 20892-9304  
301-443-3860  
<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/>

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**

1 Choke Cherry Road  
Rockville, MD 20857  
240-276-2420  
<http://www.samhsa.gov/>

**National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI)**

(800) 729-6686  
<http://ncadi.samhsa.gov/>

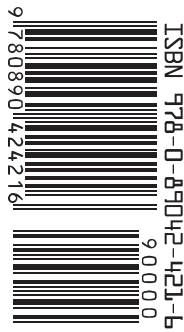
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