

OVERVIEW

People abuse substances such as alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs for varied and complicated reasons, but it is clear that our society pays a significant cost. The toll for this abuse can be seen in our hospitals and emergency departments both through direct damage to health by substance abuse and its link to physical trauma. Jails and prisons tally daily the strong connection between crime and drug dependence and abuse. Although use of some drugs such as cocaine has declined in recent years, use of other drugs such as heroin and "club drugs" has increased.

Abused substances produce some form of intoxication that alters judgment, perception, attention, or physical control.

Many substances can bring on withdrawal effects caused by cessation or reduction in the amount of the substance used. Withdrawal can range from mild anxiety to seizures and hallucinations. Drug overdose may also cause death.

Nearly all these drugs also can produce a phenomenon known as tolerance, in which one must use a larger amount of the drug to produce the same level of intoxication. Commonly abused drugs include the following:

- **Inhalants:** This group of substances includes solvents that emit vapors, causing intoxication when breathed in (inhaled). Individuals who abuse inhalants intentionally breathe in the vapors, either directly from a container, from a bag in which such a substance is in, or from a rag soaked with the substance and then placed over the mouth or nose. Inhalant intoxication happens quickly and doesn't last long.
- **Tobacco:** People cite many reasons for using tobacco, including pleasure, improved performance and vigilance, relief of depression, curbing hunger, and weight control.
- **Alcohol:** Although many people have a drink as a "pick me up," alcohol actually depresses the brain. Alcohol lessens your inhibitions, slurs speech, and decreases muscle control and coordination, and prolonged use may lead to alcoholism.

CAUSES

Use and abuse of substances such as cigarettes, alcohol, and illegal drugs may begin in childhood or the teen years. Certain risk factors may increase someone's likelihood of abusing substances.

Family history factors that influence a child's early development have been shown to be related to an increased risk of drug abuse, such as chaotic home environment, ineffective parenting, and lack of nurturing and parental attachment.

Factors related to a child's socialization outside the family may also increase risk of drug abuse, including: inappropriately aggressive or shy behavior in the classroom, poor social coping skills, poor school performance, association with a deviant peer group or isolating self from peers altogether, perception of approval of drug-use behavior.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Friends and family may be among the first to recognize the signs of substance abuse. Early recognition increases chances for successful treatment. Signs to watch for include the following:

- Giving up past activities such as sports, homework, or hanging out with new friends
- Declining grades
- Aggressiveness and irritability
- Significant change in mood or behavior
- Forgetfulness
- Disappearing money or valuables
- Feeling rundown, hopeless, depressed, or even suicidal
- Sounding selfish and not caring about others
- Use of room deodorizers and incense
- Paraphernalia such as baggies, small boxes, pipes, and rolling paper
- Physical problems with unclear cause (for example, red eyes and slurred speech)
- Getting drunk or high on drugs on a regular basis
- Lying, particularly about how much alcohol or other drugs he or she is using
- Avoiding friends or family in order to get drunk or high
- Planning drinking in advance, hiding alcohol, and drinking or using other drugs alone
- Having to drink more to get the same high
- Believing that in order to have fun you need to drink or use other drugs
- Frequent hangovers
- Pressuring others to drink or use other drugs
- Taking risks, including sexual risks
- Having "blackouts," forgetting what he or she did the night before
- Constantly talking about drinking or using other drugs
- Getting in trouble with the law
- Drinking and driving
- Suspension or other problems at school or in the workplace for an alcohol- or drug-related incident

MEDICAL TREATMENT

Most substances abusers believe they can stop using drugs on their own, but a majority who try do not succeed. Research shows that long-term drug use alters brain function and strengthens compulsions to use drugs. This craving continues even after your drug use stops.

Because of these ongoing cravings, the most important component of treatment, also called recovery, is preventing relapse. Treating substance abuse depends on both the person and the substance being used. In behavioral treatment, a counselor provides you with strategies to cope with your drug cravings and ways to avoid relapse. Your doctor may prescribe medications, such as nicotine patches and methadone, to control withdrawal symptoms and drug cravings.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE



Often, a drug user has an underlying behavioral disorder or other mental illness, one that increases risk for substance abuse. Such disorders must be treated medically and through counseling along with treatment of the drug abuse.