

# Drug Abuse and Addiction

Signs, Symptoms, and Help for Drug Problems and Substance Abuse

## Drug Abuse & Addiction

Some people are able to use recreational or prescription drugs without ever experiencing negative consequences or addiction. For many others, substance use can cause problems at work, home, school, and in relationships, leaving you feeling isolated, helpless, or ashamed.

If you're worried about your own or a friend or family member's drug use, it's important to know that help is available. Learning about the nature of drug abuse and addiction—how it develops, what it looks like, and why it can have such a powerful hold—will give you a better understanding of the problem and how to best deal with it.

## Understanding drug use, drug abuse, and addiction

People experiment with drugs for many different reasons. Many first try drugs out of curiosity, to have a good time, because friends are doing it, or in an effort to improve athletic performance or ease another problem, such as stress, anxiety, or depression. Use doesn't automatically lead to abuse, and there is no specific level at which drug use moves from casual to problematic. It varies by individual. Drug abuse and addiction is less about the amount of substance consumed or the frequency, and more to do with the consequences of drug use. No matter how often or how little you're consuming, if your drug use is causing problems in your life—at work, school, home, or in your relationships—you likely have a drug abuse or addiction problem.

## Why do some drug users become addicted, while others don't?

As with many other conditions and diseases, vulnerability to addiction differs from person to person. Your genes, mental health, family and social environment all play a role in addiction. Risk factors that increase your vulnerability include:

Family history of addiction

Abuse, neglect, or other traumatic experiences in childhood

Mental disorders such as depression and anxiety

Early use of drugs

## 5 Myths about Drug Abuse and Addiction

**MYTH 1:** Overcoming addiction is simply a matter of willpower. You can stop using drugs if you really want to. Prolonged exposure to drugs alters the brain in ways that result in powerful cravings and a compulsion to use. These brain changes make it extremely difficult to quit by sheer force of will.

**MYTH 2:** Addiction is a disease; there's nothing you can do about it. Most experts agree that addiction is a brain disease, but that doesn't mean you're a helpless victim. The brain changes associated with addiction can be treated and reversed through therapy, medication, exercise, and other treatments.

MYTH 3: Addicts have to hit rock bottom before they can get better. Recovery can begin at any point in the addiction process—and the earlier, the better. The longer drug abuse continues, the stronger the addiction becomes and the harder it is to treat. Don't wait to intervene until the addict has lost it all.

MYTH 4: You can't force someone into treatment; they have to want help. Treatment doesn't have to be voluntary to be successful. People who are pressured into treatment by their family, employer, or the legal system are just as likely to benefit as those who choose to enter treatment on their own. As they sober up and their thinking clears, many formerly resistant addicts decide they want to change.

MYTH 5: Treatment didn't work before, so there's no point trying again. Recovery from drug addiction is a long process that often involves setbacks. Relapse doesn't mean that treatment has failed or that you're a lost cause. Rather, it's a signal to get back on track, either by going back to treatment or adjusting the treatment approach.

**Support can come from:**

family members

close friends

therapists or counselors

other recovering addicts

healthcare providers

people from your faith community

When a loved one has a drug problem

**If you suspect that a friend or family member has a drug problem, here are a few things you can do:**

Speak up. Talk to the person about your concerns, and offer your help and support, without being judgmental. The earlier addiction is treated, the better. Don't wait for your loved one to hit bottom! Be prepared for excuses and denial by listing specific examples of your loved one's behavior that has you worried.

Take care of yourself. Don't get so caught up in someone else's drug problem that you neglect your own needs. Make sure you have people you can talk to and lean on for support. And stay safe. Don't put yourself in dangerous situations.

Avoid self-blame. You can support a person with a substance abuse problem and encourage treatment, but you can't force an addict to change. You can't control your loved one's decisions. Let the person accept responsibility for his or her actions, an essential step along the way to recovery for drug addiction.