



## What Is Drug Addiction?

Addiction is a disease that affects your brain and behavior. When you're addicted to drugs, you can't resist the urge to use them, no matter how much harm the drugs may cause.

Drug addiction isn't about just heroin, cocaine, or other illegal drugs. You can get addicted to alcohol, nicotine, opioid painkillers, and other legal substances.

At first, you may choose to take a drug because you like the way it makes you feel. You may think you can control how much and how often you use it. But over time, drugs change how your brain works. These physical changes can last a long time. They make you lose self-control and can lead you to damaging behaviors.

### Addiction vs. Abuse

Drug abuse is when you use legal or illegal substances in ways you shouldn't. You might take more than the regular dose of pills or use someone else's prescription. You may abuse drugs to feel good, ease stress, or avoid reality. But usually, you're able to change your unhealthy habits or stop using altogether.

Addiction is when you can't stop. Not when it puts your health in danger. Not when it causes financial, emotional, and other problems for you or your loved ones. That urge to get and use drugs can fill up every minute of the day, even if you want to quit.

### Effect on Your Brain

Your brain is wired to make you want to repeat experiences that make you feel good. So you're motivated to do them again and again.

The drugs that may be addictive target your brain's reward system. They flood your brain with a chemical called dopamine. This triggers a feeling of intense pleasure. So you keep taking the drug to chase that high.

Over time, your brain gets used to the extra dopamine. So you might need to take more of the drug to get the same good feeling. And other things you enjoyed, like food and hanging out with family, may give you less pleasure.

When you use drugs for a long time, it can cause changes in other brain chemical systems and circuits as well. They can hurt your:

- Judgment
- Decision making
- Memory
- Ability to learn

Together, these brain changes can drive you to seek out and take drugs in ways that are beyond your control.

## Who's Most Likely to Become Addicted?

Each person's body and brain is different. People also react differently to drugs. Some love the feeling the first time they try it and want more. Others hate it and never try again.

Not everyone who uses drugs becomes addicted. But it can happen to anyone and at any age. Some things may raise your chances of addiction, including:

**Family history.** Your genes are responsible for about half of your odds. If your parents or siblings have problems with alcohol or drugs, you're more likely as well. Women and men are equally likely to become addicted.

**Early drug use.** Children's brains are still growing, and drug use can change that. So taking drugs at an early age may make you more likely to get addicted when you get older.

**Mental disorders.** If you're depressed, have trouble paying attention, or worry constantly, you have a higher chance of addiction. You may turn to drugs as a way to try to feel better.

**Troubled relationships.** If you grew up with family troubles and aren't close to your parents or siblings, it may raise your chances of addiction.

## Signs of Addiction

You may have one or more of these warning signs:

- An urge to use the drug every day, or many times a day.
- You take more drugs than you want to, and for longer than you thought you would.
- You always have the drug with you, and you buy it even if you can't afford it.

- You keep using drugs even if it causes you trouble at work or makes you lash out at family and friends.
- You spend more time alone.
- You don't take care of yourself or care how you look.
- You steal, lie, or do dangerous things like driving while high or have unsafe sex.
- You spend most of your time getting, using, or recovering from the effects of the drug.
- You feel sick when you try to quit.

## When to Get Help

If your drug use is out of control or causing problems, talk to your doctor.

Getting better from drug addiction can take time. There's no cure, but treatment can help you stop using drugs and stay drug-free. Your treatment may include counseling, medicine, or both. Talk to your doctor to figure out the best plan for you.

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### Sources

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