



# Patient Information

## Overcoming Substance Abuse

**T**he term “substance abuse” refers to a pattern of drug use that is harmful to the person—physically, mentally, and socially. Alcohol is the legal drug most commonly abused. Others include tobacco, prescription pain medications (such as morphine), sedatives, and stimulants (such as some weight loss drugs). The most frequently abused illegal drugs are cocaine, marijuana, and heroin.

It’s important to distinguish physical dependence from substance abuse. Dependence means that if the drug is stopped, the body has a physical reaction, known as withdrawal. This reaction can include tremors, agitation, nausea or vomiting, anxiety, insomnia, hallucinations, or seizures. Addiction means that the person feels a psychological need for the drug. While most people who abuse drugs have both a physical dependence and a psychological addiction, a person using a legal drug appropriately and under the care of a doctor may develop physical dependence without becoming addicted. That person’s drug use is not considered abuse.

It’s estimated that 10% of adults in the United States have a substance abuse problem. As with many other diseases, early recognition and treatment are key. If you suspect that you, or someone you love, has a substance abuse problem, there are specific signs you can look for and many professionals who can steer you on the road to recovery.

### How do I know if I’m at risk?

At present, experts do not agree about what causes substance abuse. But drugs that are most often abused have a pleasurable effect on the brain’s reward system, which reinforces continual use of the drug.

Stressful life situations, including family or legal problems or unemployment; traumatic experiences, such as physical or sexual abuse or witnessing violence; and mental disorders, such as mood or personality disorders, can increase your risk of developing a substance abuse problem. In addition, if you have easy access to drugs, if people around you use drugs, or if you have a family member who’s had a substance abuse problem, you’re at higher risk.

### What are the warning signs?

If you feel an uncontrollable need to take a drug even though you know that using it will have a negative effect on you physically and emotionally, you probably have a substance abuse problem. Some specific behavioral signs include: poor judgment or irresponsible behavior (such as using a drug while driving), irritability, personality changes, sudden mood changes, low self-esteem, isolation from family and friends, and loss of interest in social activities.

You also may find that the amount of drug you need to take in order to feel its effect is increasing. Keep in mind, however, that this can happen with some prescription drugs, even when used appropriately.



under a doctor's care. If you have any concerns about your prescribed medication, talk with your doctor.

### **When do I need medical attention?**

Stopping your use of an addictive drug can be very difficult—or even dangerous—if you do it alone. In most cases, it's best to get professional assistance.

Start by talking to your doctor. He or she can help you recognize the signs of substance abuse, examine your body for any damage the drug may have caused, evaluate the severity of your addiction, and prescribe treatment or refer you to treatment programs and support groups.

### **How can I avoid the problem?**

You can help protect yourself from substance abuse, first and foremost, by not using any drugs for recreational purposes. It also helps to choose good role models, get involved in positive peer groups, and keep a positive self-image and outlook. Make healthy lifestyle choices, such as staying physically active. Develop positive strategies for coping with stress. And if substance abuse runs in your family, speak with your doctor about your risks.

### **How is it treated?**

To be successful, substance abuse treatment requires a strong commitment from you and a willingness to change. You will need to learn new ways of thinking and acting to overcome your psychological addiction and to avoid situations that could trigger a relapse. This is why virtually all substance abuse programs include some type of counseling or behavioral therapy.

The type of treatment that's best for you will depend on the drug you're abusing, the severity of the abuse, and your individual needs. For some, an outpatient treatment program may be appropriate. Other individuals with more serious or unstable conditions may need a highly structured program in which they're admitted to a hospital or residential facility.

To minimize withdrawal symptoms, you may be instructed to decrease the amount of drug you are taking slowly and you may be prescribed medications. For some abused drugs, such as morphine and heroin, substituting a medication, such as methadone or *buprenorphine* (by-preh-nor-feen), as part of a structured program can help stop harmful abuse. The ultimate goal is to phase out the monitored use of the substitute drug—though this may not be possible in all cases.

When you're recovering from substance abuse, support is extremely important. This may come in the form of groups like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, better known as AA and NA, as well as family members and friends. If your substance abuse was related to or caused family or relationship problems, family or couples therapy also may be helpful.

For more information, visit the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Substance Abuse Help for Individuals web page ([www.samhsa.gov/treatment/treatment\\_public\\_i.aspx](http://www.samhsa.gov/treatment/treatment_public_i.aspx)), which contains useful resources for finding treatment. To find a local AA or NA meeting, visit their web sites ([www.alcoholics-anonymous.org](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org) and [www.na.org](http://www.na.org)). ●

