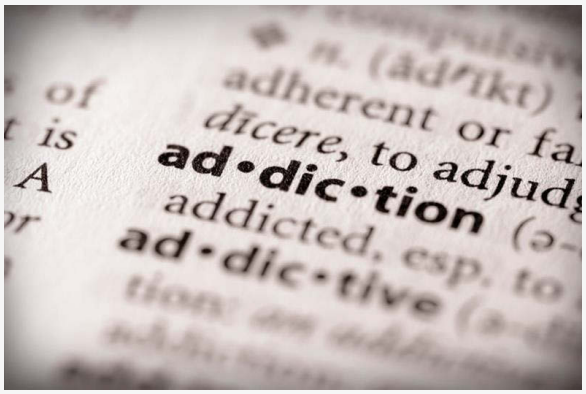
What is Addiction?

When people who use drugs can't stop taking a drug even if they want to, it's called addiction. The urge is too strong to control, even if you know the drug is causing harm.



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When people start taking drugs, they don't plan to get addicted. They like how the drug makes them feel. They believe they can control how much and how often they take the drug. However, drugs change the brain. Those who use drugs start to need the drug just to feel normal. That is addiction, and it can quickly take over a person's life.

Addiction can become more important than the need to eat or sleep. The urge to get and use the drug can fill every moment of a person's life. The addiction replaces all the things the person used to enjoy. A person who is addicted might do almost anything—lying, stealing, or hurting people—to keep taking the drug. This could get the person arrested.

Addiction is a brain disease.

- Drugs change how the brain works.
- These brain changes can last for a long time.
- They can cause problems like mood swings, memory loss, even trouble thinking and making decisions.

Addiction is a disease, just as diabetes and cancer are diseases. Addiction is not simply a weakness. People from all backgrounds, rich or poor, can get an addiction. Addiction can happen at any age, but it usually starts when a person is young.

Do You or a Loved One Have a Drug Use Problem?

Here are some questions to ask yourself or someone you know. If the answer to some or all of these questions is yes, you might have an addiction.

- Do you think a lot about drugs?
- Did you ever try to stop or cut down on your drug use but couldn't?
- Have you ever thought you couldn't fit in or have a good time without drugs?
- Do you ever use drugs because you are upset or angry at other people?
- Have you ever used a drug without knowing what it was or what it would do to you?
- Have you ever taken one drug to get over the effects of another?

- Have you ever made mistakes at a job or at school because you were using drugs?
- Does the thought of running out of drugs really scare you?
- Have you ever stolen drugs or stolen stuff to pay for drugs?
- Have you ever been arrested or in the hospital because of your drug use?
- Have you ever overdosed on drugs?
- Has using drugs hurt your relationships with other people?

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You can call **1-800-662-HELP (4357)** at any time to find drug treatment centers in your area.

Signs of Drug Use and Addiction

People with drug problems might act differently than they used to. They might:

- spend a lot of time alone
- lose interest in their favorite things
- get messy—for instance, not bathe, change clothes, or brush their teeth
- be really tired and sad
- be very energetic, talk fast, or say things that don't make sense
- be nervous or cranky (in a bad mood)
- quickly change between feeling bad and feeling good
- sleep at strange hours
- miss important appointments
- have problems at work
- eat a lot more or a lot less than usual

People with an addiction usually can't stop taking the drug on their own. They want and need more. They might try to stop taking the drug and then feel really sick. Then they take the drug again to stop feeling sick. They keep using the drug even though it's causing terrible family, health, or legal problems. They need help to stop using drugs.

Drug treatment can help. Read more on the Easy-to-Read DrugFacts webpage, Drug Treatment (easyread.drugabuse.gov/content/drug-treatment).

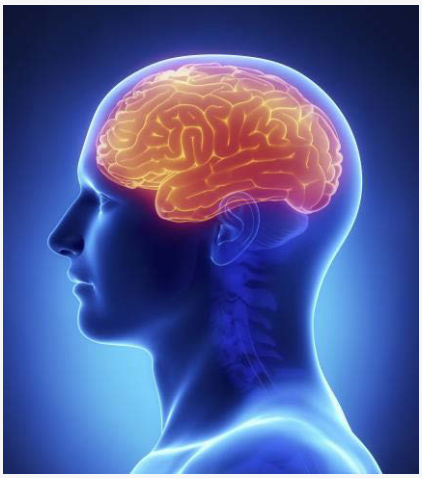
How Does Drug Use Become Addiction?

Not everyone who uses drugs becomes addicted. Each person's body and brain are different. So people react to drugs differently. Your relationships, surroundings, and stress can also make you more or less likely to become addicted.

But how does taking drugs become an addiction?

Our brains want us to repeat things that we need or enjoy—like eating a good meal. That's why you want to eat more dessert than you know you should. That's why a little child often shouts "again!" when you do something to make her laugh.

All drugs of abuse excite the parts of the brain that make you feel good. But, after you take a drug for a while, the feel-good parts of your brain get used to it. Then you need to take more of the drug to get the same good feeling. Soon, your brain and body must have the drug to just feel normal. You feel sick and awful without the drug. You no longer have the good feelings that you had when you first used the drug.



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Addiction Risk Factors

What makes people more likely to get addicted to drugs?

- **Trouble at home.** If your home is an unhappy place, or was when you were growing up, you might be more likely to have a drug problem. When kids aren't cared for well, or there are lots of fights, or a parent is using drugs, the risk of addiction goes up.
- **Mental health problems.** People who have mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, or attention deficit disorder are more likely to become addicted. They might use drugs to try to feel better. Read more at the Easy-to-Read Drug Facts webpage, Drug Use and Mental Health Problems Often Happen Together.
- **Trouble in school, trouble at work, trouble with making friends.** Failures at school or work, or trouble getting along with people, can make life hard. You might use drugs to get your mind off these problems.
- **Hanging around other people who use drugs.** Friends or family members who use drugs might get you into trouble with drugs as well.
- **Starting drug use when you're young.** When kids use drugs, it affects how their bodies and brains finish growing. Using drugs when you're young increases your chances of becoming addicted when you're an adult.
- **Your biology.** Everyone's bodies react to drugs differently. Some people like the feeling the first time they try a drug and want more. Other people hate how it feels and never try it again. Some are more likely to get addicted, but there's no way to test for that.

Does Addiction Run in Families?

Addiction can run in families. There are two reasons this happens. The first is some people have mistakes in their genes that make them more likely to get addicted. Genes carry information in your body that makes you who you are and what you look like. When you have mistakes in your genes, you're born this way—there is nothing you can do about it. And these mistakes can be passed on to babies. It's like having a greater chance of getting certain kinds of cancer because one of your parents had it. Unlike some cancers, though, there aren't tests that can tell you if you carry those defects in your body.

The second reason is that children see a parent or family members using drugs and think it's okay. Or addiction causes a lot of problems in the house, and children don't get the care or attention they need. Children who don't feel loved have a greater chance of using drugs and becoming addicted. This can be a problem that continues through many generations. It can happen whether the family is rich, poor, or in between.

The good news is that many children whose parents had drug problems don't become addicted when they grow up. The risk is higher, but it doesn't have to happen. And you can protect yourself from the risk by not using drugs at all.

Why Is It So Hard to Quit Drugs?

Healing from addiction takes time. Making up your mind to stop using drugs is a big step. Being addicted makes you afraid of what will happen if you don't keep taking the drug. People often won't try quitting until they're forced to, because it seems too hard.

When you stop using the drug, it upsets your body and brain. You might feel very sick for a while, and feel a very strong need to take the drug. It can be really hard to refuse to use the drug when you feel that bad.

But you don't have to do it alone. Support groups, treatment programs, and sometimes medicines can help. You'll meet people who understand what you're going through, who can give you advice and cheer you on. Counselors can help you find medicines that make you feel less sick and reduce your cravings to use the drug. They can also teach you how to cope with problems without using drugs. Visit the Easy-to-Read Drug Facts webpage Types of Drug Treatment to learn more.

After you've stopped using the drug, you still have a lot to do:

- You have to relearn how to live without using drugs.
- You have to work on the problems your drug use caused with your family, your job, your friends, and your money.
- You have to stay away from people you used drugs with and places where you used.
- You have to learn what makes you want to take drugs again, so you can avoid or work on those things.
- You may also need treatment for problems that led to your drug use, such as depression, anxiety, or other mental health problems.

A **trigger** is anything that makes a person feel the urge to go back to using drugs. It can be a place, person, thing, smell, feeling, or memory that reminds the person of taking a drug and getting high. A trigger can be something stressful that you want to escape from. It can even be something that makes you feel happy. People fighting addiction need to stay away from the triggers that can make them start using drugs again, just like people with breathing problems need to avoid smoke and dust.