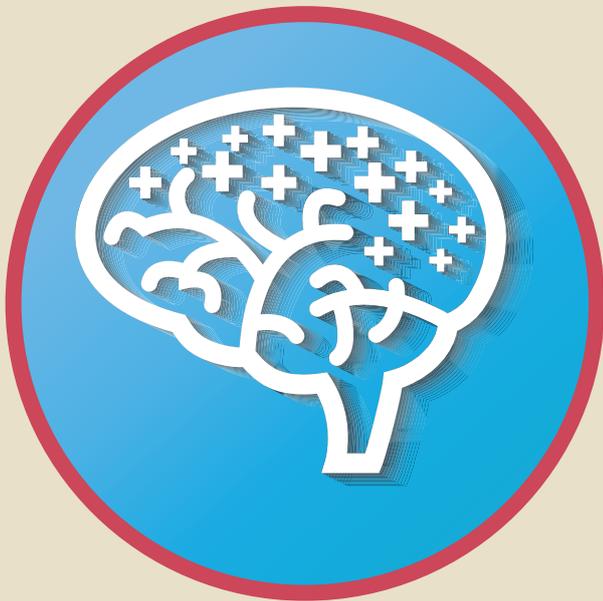


Substance Abuse



Drug Dependence and Abuse

Overview

Drug abuse and drug dependence represent different ends of the same disease process. Drug abuse is an intense desire to obtain increasing amounts of a particular substance or substances to the exclusion of all other activities.

Drug dependence is the body's physical need, or addiction, to a specific agent. Over the long term, this dependence results in physical harm, behavior problems, and association with people who also abuse drugs. Stopping the use of the drug can result in a specific withdrawal syndrome.

- Drug abuse is a common problem that plagues all ethnic groups and social classes worldwide. • Different people will be affected by drugs in different ways. Some people are more prone to addiction than others.
- Drug abuse and dependence is a disease and not a character defect. A person being treated for this condition requires the same respect as a person with any other medical condition.
- A person who abuses drugs may not realize that he or she has a problem. Family members often bring the abuse to the attention of a health care provider. Unfortunately, some people who abuse drugs only realize they have a problem after they have been arrested for a drug-related problem.
- A wide variety of substances can be abused. These take the form of illegal drugs (such as phencyclidine known as PCP and heroin), plant products (such as marijuana or hallucinogenic mushrooms), chemicals (the inhalation of gasoline, for example), or prescription medications. More information can be found at the National Institute on Drug Abuse.
- Substances can be taken into the body in several ways:
 - Oral ingestion (swallowing)
 - Inhalation (breathing in) or smoking
 - Injection into the veins (shooting up)
 - Depositing onto the mucosa (moist skin) of the mouth or nose (snorting)

Causes and Risk Factors

The most common reason why people abuse drugs is to "get high." Adolescents and preadolescents can become involved in experimentation with drugs. However, only a small percentage of people who experiment with drugs become drug abusers. The desire to get high may be from an underlying disease such as depression. It may also come from the pressures of coping with school, work, or family tensions.

- Drug abuse by pregnant women results in the developing fetus (baby) being exposed to these same drugs. The baby may develop birth defects. The baby may be born with an addiction and go into withdrawal. The baby may be born with a disease associated with drug abuse such as HIV/AIDS.

- People with specific medical conditions, such as chronic pain from cancer, can become dependent on certain drugs but not addicted in the sense they would steal a stereo to pay for the drugs.
- Many psychiatric diseases can be complicated by substance abuse. Similarly, drug abuse may be a sign of a more serious mental health problem.
- Athletes have abused a variety of agents, such as steroids, to enhance muscle mass or improve athletic ability. Athletes have also abused amphetamines to make them feel more powerful and to mask pain so they can continue to play even with injuries. Drug testing programs have reduced this problem to some extent, but drug use among athletes is still a problem worldwide.

Symptoms

The signs and symptoms displayed by a person depend on what substances the person has abused. A person who has not abused drugs extensively may experience unpleasant symptoms and may seek help from family members and friends. Chronic drug abusers generally know what to expect from their drug use and rarely seek help for themselves.

- Most agents cause a change in level of consciousness—usually a decrease in responsiveness. A person using drugs may be hard to awaken or may act bizarrely.
- Suppression of brain activity can be so severe that the person may stop breathing, which can cause death.
- Alternatively, the person may be agitated, anxious, and unable to sleep. Hallucinations are possible.
- Abnormal vital signs (temperature, pulse rate, respiratory rate, blood pressure) are possible and can be life threatening. Vital sign readings can be increased, decreased, or absent completely.
- Sleepiness, confusion, and coma are common. Because of this decline in alertness, the drug abuser is at risk for assault or rape, robbery, and accidental death.
- Skin can be cool and sweaty, or hot and dry.
- Chest pain is possible and can be caused by heart or lung damage from drug abuse.
- Abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea are possible. Vomiting blood, or blood in bowel movements, can be life threatening.
- Withdrawal syndromes are variable depending on the agent but can be life threatening.
- Sharing IV needles among people can transmit infectious diseases, including HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) and hepatitis types B and C.
- Many common household drugs and chemicals can be abused. Gasoline and other hydrocarbons are frequently abused by adolescents and preadolescents. Over-the-counter drugs, such as cold medications, are commonly taken in excessive doses by adolescents and young adults to get high. Prescription medications are additional examples of drugs that are abused and that can be obtained illegally (without a prescription).
- Amphetamines and cocaine cause impotence in men. Sildenafil (Viagra) has been used by cocaine and amphetamine users to counteract impotence. Because Viagra is generally prescribed for mid- dle-aged and older men, a younger person must be questioned as to why he has a need for Viagra.

When to seek medical care

Someone who wishes to receive treatment for drug abuse or dependence should see a doctor. Family members should accompany the person with a drug abuse problem to the doctor's appointment to discuss the issue.

If you or a loved one suffers from drug abuse/addiction, please do not hesitate to contact a MIND specialist for a confidential consultation.

A person with an acute drug overdose should be brought to a hospital's emergency department immediately. The emergency department is a frequent place for people who suffer from drug dependence to seek medical care. People who have behavior problems may come to the attention of the Emergency Medical Services system or police. These public service professionals can assist in bringing the person to the hospital.

- Anyone with an alteration of consciousness needs immediate medical evaluation. Such a person may not recognize how ill he or she is, or may be a danger to himself or herself or to others. A hallucinating person, for example, may think he can fly and jump off a building killing himself, as well as a person below. Violent behavior is also possible.
- Anyone with abnormal vital signs, severe pain, or any severe or sudden onset of problems needs immediate care.

Tests and Diagnosis

The doctor will determine what substances have been abused and will ask what symptoms prompted the person to seek care. The doctor will then perform a physical examination to evaluate for possible organ damage.

- Laboratory studies are directed to evaluate for specific organ damage.
- Drug screening tests are readily available for some agents. Other substances can be detected with specialized tests at only a few laboratories in the country. Some agents cannot be detected by laboratory evaluation. There may be little benefit from drug testing.

Treatment

Self-Care at Home

- Home care is not appropriate if the drug of abuse cannot be identified. People who have ingested unknown drugs should be taken to the emergency department.
- People with severe symptoms should not be treated at home. They should be taken directly to the emergency department.

Medical Treatment

The key to treatment is stopping the abuse of the drugs or substances.

- Agitated or violent people need physical restraint and may need sedating medications in the emergency department until the effects of the drugs wear off. This can be disturbing for the person to experience and for family members to witness. Medical professionals go to great lengths to use as little force and as few medications as possible. It is important to remember that whatever the medical staff does, it is to protect the person.
- Very few antidotes are available for drug intoxications. In most cases, the only way to eliminate a drug is for the body to metabolize it—in other words, let it run its course. In some acute intoxications, the doctor may administer certain agents to help prevent absorption in the stomach or to help speed metabolism of the drug.

- The dose of some agents (for example, benzodiazepines and barbiturates) must be reduced slowly to prevent withdrawal. Withdrawal from some drugs can cause significant problems, and stopping these drugs should only be done under the supervision of an appropriate health care provider. Withdrawal from other agents, such as narcotics, is uncomfortable but generally not harmful, and unpleasant effects can be lessened with prescription medications. These prescriptions must be combined with a specific plan for stopping drug abuse. The use of the prescription medication combined with continued drug abuse may cause life-threatening complications.
- People who are acutely intoxicated may need hospitalization for detoxification.
- Counseling programs may be suggested.

Prevention

Prevention involves avoiding places frequented by drug abusers and not associating with known drug abusers.

Knowledge about drug use and abuse is key to preventing abuse in the first place and avoiding relapse among those who are recovering.

Outlook

Treatment of drug dependence and abuse requires a long-term outlook. A person who has abused drugs in the past must be constantly vigilant never to use them again. Relapses are common. Family and friends must provide support with a caring attitude during these relapses.

Sources

Obtained from www.webmd.com and edited by IDRAAC