



# SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

## Let's talk about it

### What is it?

Substance use disorder (SUD) is a complex condition in which there is uncontrolled use of a substance despite harmful consequences. People with SUD have an intense focus on using a certain substance(s) such as alcohol, tobacco, or illicit drugs, to the point where the person's ability to function in day-to-day life becomes impaired. People keep using the substance even when they know it is causing or will cause problems. The most severe SUDs are sometimes called addictions.

People with a substance use disorder may have distorted thinking and behaviors. Changes in the brain's structure and function are what cause people to have intense cravings, changes in personality, abnormal movements, and other behaviors. Brain imaging studies show changes in the areas of the brain that relate to judgment, decision making, learning, memory, and behavioral control.

Repeated substance use can cause changes in how the brain functions. These changes can last long after the immediate effects of the substance wears off, or in other words, after the period of intoxication. Intoxication is the intense pleasure, euphoria, calm, increased perception and sense, and other feelings that are caused by the substance. Intoxication symptoms are different for each substance.

When someone has a substance use disorder, they usually build up a tolerance to the substance, meaning they need larger amounts to feel the effects.

People with substance use and behavioral addictions may be aware of their problem but not be able to stop even if they want and try to. The addiction may cause physical and psychological problems as well as interpersonal problems such as with family members and friends or at work. Alcohol and drug use is one of the leading causes of preventable illnesses and premature death nationwide.

### Signs & Symptoms

Symptoms of substance use disorder are grouped into four categories:

- **Impaired control:** a craving or strong urge to use the substance; desire or failed attempts to cut down or control substance use.
- **Social problems:** substance use causes failure to complete major tasks at work, school or home; social, work or leisure activities are given up or cut back because of substance use.
- **Risky use:** substance is used in risky settings; continued use despite known problems.
- **Drug effects:** tolerance (need for larger amounts to get the same effect); withdrawal symptoms (different for each substance).

Many people experience substance use disorder along with another psychiatric disorder. Oftentimes another psychiatric disorder precedes substance use disorder, or the use of a substance may trigger or worsen another psychiatric disorder.

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## How is it treated?

Effective treatments for substance use disorders are available.

The first step is recognition of the problem. The recovery process can be delayed when a person lacks awareness of problematic substance use. Although interventions by concerned friends and family often prompt treatment, self-referrals are always welcome and encouraged.

A medical professional should conduct a formal assessment of symptoms to identify if a substance use disorder is present. All patients can benefit from treatment, regardless of whether the disorder is mild, moderate, or severe. Unfortunately, many people who meet criteria for a substance use disorder and could benefit from treatment don't receive help.

Because SUDs affect many aspects of a person's life, multiple types of treatment are often required. For most, a combination of medication and individual or group therapy is most effective. Treatment approaches that address an individual's specific situation and any co-occurring medical, psychiatric, and social problems is optimal for leading to sustained recovery.

Medications are used to control drug cravings, relieve symptoms of withdrawal, and to prevent relapses. Psychotherapy can help individuals with SUD better understand their behavior and motivations, develop higher self-esteem, cope with stress, and address other psychiatric problems.

A person's recovery plan is unique to the person's specific needs and may include strategies outside of formal treatment.

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