

ADDICTION



**World Health
Organization**

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE **Eastern Mediterranean**

What is addiction?

Addiction is a chronic disease. It affects a person's brain and changes their behaviour so that they act in a way that harms them. They become unable to stop taking a drug or engaging in a certain behaviour (gambling, shopping, online gaming) to the point where it becomes harmful.

People may feel it does not hurt to take a drug or gamble occasionally for fun or with friends. In fact, some people are able to maintain their control over such behaviour. However, others lose their control and start doing it frequently even if it causes problems for them. Eventually, if the drug use or other addictive behaviour continues, persistent changes occur in the brain. These changes make addiction a chronic disease. Addicted people are at risk of relapsing into their problem behaviour, and require long-term treatment – possibly even life-long treatment.

Not everyone who uses a drug gets addicted, but if someone starts and continues to use a drug even though they know there may be serious consequences like legal problems or difficulties at work or with their family, there is a strong chance that person will get addicted.

We say someone is drug dependent when they feel a strong urge to use a drug or they need to take more and more of it over time to achieve the same level of "high" (tolerance), or if they suffer from unpleasant physical and/or mental symptoms when they do not use the drug (withdrawal). The person does not care about harmful consequences and starts to fail in their social roles and responsibilities.

Common signs and symptoms of addiction

Different drugs have different chemical structures and can have different effects on people who take them. In general, they may be sedatives like opioids, stimulant like amphetamines or induce hallucinations like LSD. However, people who become dependent on any drug are likely to show similar signs of addiction:

- They use the drug frequently and have an intense urge to use it.
- Over time, they need ever more of the drug to get the same "high" effect.
- They spend more and more time on getting and using the drug or recovering from its effects, even if it interferes with their daily life and responsibilities.
- They spend money on the drug even though they cannot afford it.
- They neglect their usual responsibilities at work, in the family or socially, and even cut down on recreational activities because of their habit.

- They cannot stop using even though they see how drugs are damaging their life.
- They do things to get the drug that they normally would not do, such as stealing.
- They drive or do other risky activities when they are under the influence of the drug.
- They try several times to stop using the drug but cannot do so.
- When they try to stop using the drug, they experience withdrawal symptoms. These may be physical symptoms such as like body aches or mental symptoms such as severe anxiety and agitation.

People are likely to show similar symptoms if they are addicted to another type of behavior such as gambling or shopping.

Common causes of addiction

Like other mental disorders, addiction is the result of interaction between a person's biology and their environment:

- **Biology.** Some people are more at risk of developing addiction than others because of their genetic structure. If they have a close family member with addiction, their risk of getting addicted will be higher. Having a mental disorder also increases the chances that a person will use drugs.
- **Environment.** Living somewhere drugs are easily available, being poor, having a disrupted family, being exposed to violence, physical or sexual abuse and peer pressure can all increase the risk of using and continuing to use drugs. The earlier someone starts experimenting with drugs, the more likely it is they will get addicted. In addition, some drugs are more likely to cause addiction than others; some can even cause addiction the first time you take them.

Anybody can get addicted

Very importantly, addiction is not a disease of immoral or weak people. Anybody may get addicted if they try a drug. Addiction can happen the first time someone uses certain drugs. For other people, it happens after they have used a drug a few times, while some people may not get addicted. Addiction is a complex disorder and not easy to predict how your body will react to a drug in the short or long term.

When to seek help

Many people find it hard to talk about their drug problem or other addiction because it is a taboo or they are afraid of being seen as weak or immoral. And when drug use is illegal and users face harsh punishments like arrest, it can be even harder to talk about it.

However, it is important to seek help as soon as possible. The sooner someone seeks help, the easier it will be to successfully treat their addiction. You may think of talking to a trusted friend, family member or teacher. Asking a doctor for help is a safe choice even if drug use is illegal in your country, because in most countries people being treated for addiction will not be punished for having taken drugs. If you feel you are not ready to see a doctor, you can call a helpline and talk to the counsellor anonymously.

In any case you need to consider getting help if you notice:

- You cannot stop using a drug, despite the harm it causes.
- You neglect your responsibilities because of drug use, or people around you say you have changed a lot.
- Your drug use has led to unsafe behaviour, such as sharing needles or unprotected sex.
- When you do not get the drug, there are annoying withdrawal symptoms and you feel compelled to use the drug to relieve them.

How can you help a friend or family member with drug use behaviour?

The first step to help someone with a drug use problem is to understand and recognize addictive behaviours. Some changes may be warning signs of a drug use problem:

Problems at school or work: frequently missing school or work, a sudden disinterest in school activities or work, or a drop in grades or the quality of work or performance.

Physical health issues: lack of energy and motivation, weight loss or gain, red eyes or being overly excited or agitated at times.

Neglected appearance: lack of interest in clothing, grooming or looks.

Changes in behaviour: exaggerated efforts to bar family members from entering their room, spending an unusually long time in the bathroom, being secretive about where they go and what they do; drastic changes in behaviour and relationships with family and friends. You may notice that their circle of friends has changed recently.

Money issues: sudden requests for money without a reasonable explanation; money going missing from the house; valuable things disappearing from your home which may indicate that they are being sold to buy drugs.

If you know or think someone is using drugs, these may be symptoms of a possible overdose, which is an emergency:

- changes in consciousness
- trouble breathing
- seizures or convulsions
- signs of a possible heart attack, such as chest pain or pressure
- extreme agitation and disruptive behaviour.

Preventing and treating addiction

Preventing drug use is not a one-off intervention. It is a process that involves schools, families and society at large. You can be part of this effort by improving your personal, social and parenting skills, and learning to provide a safe, warm and supportive environment for your children and others around you. However, even if drug use starts, it should not be taken as a personal failure or something to feel guilty about. Look at it as a disease, and get help as fast as possible. Early intervention and treatment are among the best ways to prevent a chronic disease.

If addiction has already developed, it can be treated and managed successfully. Relapses happen, but relapses are not a sign of treatment failure or personal weakness. Relapse is a predictable phase in any chronic disease. Over time, you and your doctor will find the best way that works for you to manage and prevent relapses.

Treating addiction usually involves several stages:

Detoxification (detox). As a first step, the addicted person needs help to gain control over their urge for drug use and to suffer less from withdrawal symptoms. Detox may involve gradually reducing the amount of a drug while using medicines to relieve the symptoms of withdrawal. For opioid use there are substitute medicines, such as methadone and buprenorphine, to control withdrawal symptoms for temporary use in a safe and controlled way, as well as medicines that contradict its effect like naloxone.

Relapse prevention. After going through the acute phase of detoxification, users need help staying away from drugs. Behavioural therapies help them find the best ways to cope with cravings and avoid a relapse. In self-help groups, they can share their experiences and learn from others with similar problems how to get back to a healthy life, cope with cravings and manage relapses. Family therapy supports them in solving problems caused because of their drug use, or in reducing the tensions and conflicts that can trigger a relapse. Some people need a structured environment such as a therapeutic community to be able to prevent relapses, especially in the period immediately after detox. There is no one-size-fits-all solution; over time, each person will find their way with the support of their treatment team.

Maintenance treatment. Maintenance treatment may be used for people addicted to heroin or other opioids. Opioid addiction is a severe form of addiction and difficult to stop. Not everybody who wants to quit opioids is able to do so. For these people, the best way – supported by science and accepted all around the world – is to replace opioids with a substance that reduces the urge for opioids and is much less harmful. A medical team will supervise this treatment, and people who go through it will be able to get back to a normal life and avoid the dangerous consequences of opioid use.

Harm reduction. People using drugs who have not yet started treatment need to take care of themselves to avoid some very harmful potential consequences of drug use: getting infected with viral diseases such as HIV or hepatitis B and C. If you inject drugs, you need to use only your own syringe and other injection equipment; do not reuse your syringe and if you have to do so, clean it before use. Do not share needles, syringes and other things used for injection with anybody, not even your beloved partner or close friend.

Treating overdoses. With opioids, it is possible to take a life-threatening overdose. The good news is that a medicine called naloxone can save the life of someone who has overdosed. If you or someone around you uses opioids, consider keeping naloxone in a safe place in the house and learn how and when it must be used.

How can you help yourself?

Addiction is a chronic relapsing disease. Once you have passed the initial phase of detoxification or got established on an opioid substitution programme, you need to learn how to cope and prevent the risk of relapsing into use.

- See a counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist. Seek help to set a treatment plan for relapse prevention and to solve problems like family and marital problems or other mental disorders such as depression and anxiety that can trigger your drug use. Stick to your treatment plan.
- Try to identify the triggers for your craving. This may include people, places and things. Where possible, avoid those triggers. Festive/holiday occasions and anniversaries may be particularly difficult times for you. If you feel under pressure on such occasions, talk to someone – a trusted family member or friend, your spouse, your support group or your therapist. Do not suppress your emotions; think about them and think about activities you can do to ventilate these emotions and take your focus off yourself.
- Join a support group. Working with people who face similar challenges can really help you to control your urges to use drugs.
- Keep yourself busy with activities that are healthy and interesting for you – exercise, sport, painting, singing, etc.
- Remember: having a relapse does not mean your treatment has failed. Do not hide it; reach out and seek for help immediately. Talk to your doctor or therapist or someone trusted right away to resume the treatment, modify it, or replace it with another treatment.

How can you help a friend or family member with relapse?

It can be frustrating when someone you love has an addiction problem and relapses. You have to remind yourself that this is the nature of their disease. It is natural to feel angry, get depressed, blame them for their behaviour or just deny it. But none of these reactions will help.

- Remember that simply demanding: “be strong, don’t do that” does not work.
- Watch out for signs of a relapse.
- Try to keep the doors of communication open. Let the person feel comfortable to talk to you without fear of being blamed.
- Help them to get an appointment, resume their treatment and stick to their treatment plan.

This is one of a series of factsheets produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) to give the general public more information about mental disorders and how they can be treated. You can download all the factsheets free of charge from the WHO website at: www.emro.who.int/mnh.