What is drug and alcohol addiction?

Addiction is considered a brain disease because drugs change how the brain is structured and how it works. These brain changes are ongoing, which is why drug addiction is considered a “relapsing” disease—people in recovery are at risk for going back to drug use even after years of not taking the drug.

Addiction is a lot like other diseases, such as heart disease. Both have serious impacts, are preventable, and can be treated. If left untreated, they can last a lifetime.

If it feels good, what’s the problem?

When they first use a drug, people may think of just the positive effects. They also may believe that they can control their use. Drugs can quickly take over a person’s life. Over time, taking the drug becomes necessary for the user just to feel “normal.” They may then seek and take drugs even though it causes serious problems for themselves and their loved ones.

Why do some people become addicted and others do not?

As with any disease, some people are more at risk than others for developing it. No one thing can predict if a person will become addicted to drugs. The more risk factors a person has, the greater the chance that taking drugs can lead to addiction.

- **Biology.** The genes that people are born with account for about half of a person’s risk for addiction.
- **Environment.** These are factors such as peer pressure, physical and sexual abuse, early exposure to drugs, stress, and life at home.
- **Development.** Stages in a person’s life can affect addiction risk. Although taking drugs at any age can lead to addiction, the earlier that drug use begins, the more likely it will progress to addiction.

Why do people start taking drugs?

People start for different reasons, such as:

- **To feel good.** Most abused drugs give people intense feelings of pleasure. They first feel euphoria, followed by other effects that differ based on the drug.

- **To feel better.** Some people with anxiety, stress and depression try to lessen these feelings with drugs. Stress can be a challenge for recovery.

- **To do better.** Some people use drugs to improve their performance in sports, at work, or in school.

- **Curiosity or to impress.** Peer pressure is often a reason for teens to start. They may want to impress their friends or rebel against authority.
Abuse or dependence: what is the difference?

Substance abuse is a pattern of alcohol or drug abuse leading to problems in a person’s life. Problems can be caused by drinking alcohol or using drugs in ways that cause the person to:

- Put others at risk, such as driving, working with tools, and watching children.
- Have relationship problems with family and friends.
- Get into legal, work, or school trouble.

Substance abuse can happen with legal or illegal drugs. Alcohol is the most common one.

Substance dependence means the person has developed a “need” for alcohol or drugs. The person continues to drink or use in spite of problems in his or her life. He or she may develop a tolerance so that more alcohol or drugs are needed to get the same effect. This person may have withdrawal, having physical or emotional distress if use is cut back or stopped. Work or school may suffer and health problems can start. He or she is not able to see that these problems are from alcohol or drug use.

Getting help

Seek help if you or a loved one has signs of substance abuse or dependence. There are inpatient and outpatient programs which may involve individual or group counseling.

Treatment is focused on teaching the person about recovery and how to manage withdrawal symptoms. Family and friends are encouraged to take part. Joining a Twelve Step program is encouraged to start and keep a lifestyle free from alcohol and drugs.

Signs there is a problem

The following are signs that a person has a problem with drugs or alcohol. How many of these do you see in yourself or someone you care about?

- Drinks or uses drugs in spite of negative consequences.
- Not able to keep promises to stop or cut down use.
- Gets high or intoxicated regularly.
- Lies about how much or how often he or she uses.
- Becomes defensive or angry when confronted about use.
- Withdraws from family and friends.
- Prefers the company of other drinkers or users.
- Becomes less involved in activities once enjoyed sober and chooses to party instead.
- Talks a lot about alcohol or drugs.
- Believes that he or she needs to drink in order to have fun.
- Pressures others to drink or use.
- Hides or sneaks alcohol, drugs, or supplies.
- Gets in trouble with the law.
- Takes risks, such as driving high or when drunk, or takes sexual risks.
- Work or school suffers.
- Misses work or school due to use.
- Has blackouts or periods of time that he or she cannot remember.
- Has mood swings.
- Has depressed, hopeless, or suicidal feelings.

Talk to your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

For more health information, contact the Library for Health Information at 614-293-3707 or e-mail health-info@osu.edu.

© February 2, 2017, The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center.