



Addiction Q & A Issue

Q: Why do people get addicted to drugs?

A: Addictive drugs release dopamine in the brain. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that makes people feel good. Our bodies already produce dopamine naturally, and when the brain is flooded with extra dopamine from repeated drug use, the reward circuits become desensitized and the body stops producing dopamine on its own. This means that the person now needs drugs to get his or her dopamine levels back up to normal. Without drugs to “artificially” produce dopamine, the now addicted person can become chemically and biologically depressed. Addictive drugs subvert the way our brains register pleasure, and corrupt learning and motivation.

Q: Why is being addicted to drugs a problem?

A: Drug addicts often engage in risky behavior. They experience impaired physical and mental control along with social impairment. They go through withdrawal symptoms when they try to stop using drugs. Many addicts spend a great deal of time trying to obtain money for drugs, and some commit crimes to support their addiction. Drug use becomes central to the addict’s thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Even if the addict understands that drug use is harmful, he or she feels a strong desire to use in spite of all the harmful consequences.

Q: How quickly can a person become addicted?

A: This is a difficult question to answer. The biology of a person’s body, genetics, lifestyle, frequency of use, and the type and purity of the drug used all play a part in how quickly someone can become addicted to drugs. Sensitivity to

drugs varies widely from one person to another. One person might use a drug several times without developing a problem, while another might be especially vulnerable and overdose with the first use.

Q: Isn’t drug addiction really just a personality disorder?

A: No. Addiction is a disease of the brain. Repeated drug use over time changes the brain structure and function in long-lasting ways that continue after the addict has stopped using. The decision to begin using drugs is a choice, but some people are predisposed to addiction—and once they start, they can’t stop on their own. Continued use results in changes to the molecules and cells of the brain that affect mood, memory, and thinking processes. These changes have a big influence on all aspects of a person’s behavior. Drug use changes an addict’s brain, behavior, and social functioning in critical ways.

Q: If addiction is a disease, is there a cure?

A: Addiction is a treatable disease, but there is no secular medical “cure” for addiction. Drug addicts can recover, and can remain in recovery through addiction therapy programs that over time can retrain the brain. Just like people who suffer from heart disease or diabetes, drug addicts can learn behavioral changes, and some may take medication as part of a treatment regimen. Many addicts and alcoholics have been able to stop drug use with the help of spirituality. But like many other diseases, addiction is a chronic disorder, and while some people can quit “cold turkey” or after just one treatment program, many addicts require longer-term treatment and often repeated treatments.

Q: What are some signs that a person might be an addict?

A: Drug addicts and alcoholics often hide their drugs and alcohol. If a family

member or coworker is oddly protective of a certain room or area, there might be a problem. Finding a liquor bottle or stash of drugs is a common tip-off. Another indicator of drug addiction is unusual weight loss. A side effect of methamphetamine or cocaine addiction is unhealthy and rapid weight loss. A sudden change in mood along with unpredictable emotions and actions can also be a sign of drug or alcohol abuse. Panic and paranoia attacks might also be an indicator. (**See more here:** <https://www.caring.com/articles/20-secret-signs-of-addiction>.)

Q: What is withdrawal? How long does it last?

A: Withdrawal describes the various symptoms that occur after a person abruptly reduces or stops long-term use of a drug. Length of withdrawal and symptoms vary with the type of drug. For example, physical symptoms of heroin withdrawal may include restlessness, muscle and bone pain, insomnia, diarrhea, vomiting, and cold flashes. These physical symptoms may last for several days, but the general depression, or dysphoria (opposite of euphoria), that often accompanies heroin withdrawal may last for weeks. In many cases, withdrawal can easily be treated with medications to ease the symptoms, but treating withdrawal is not the same as treating addiction.

Q: What is detoxification, or "detox"?

A: Detoxification is the process of allowing the body to rid itself of a drug while managing the symptoms of withdrawal. Detox alone is not treatment, but is often the first step in a drug treatment program. Treatment with behavioral therapy and/or a medication (if available) should follow detox.

Q: How can I help a friend or coworker who is addicted to drugs?

A: Helping a friend or coworker who is struggling with a drug or alcohol problem can be difficult. But not helping could enable the person to continue in the addiction. If you suspect a coworker of drug abuse; talking to a supervisor is often the right thing to do. Many employers offer drug/alcohol treatment programs that can get your coworker back on the right track. Some people might hesitate to go to management because they think their suspicions could be wrong. If you *are* wrong, everyone will go back to their workday and no harm is done. But if you are right, your coworker will get the help he or she needs before things get worse. You might even save the coworker's life. And remember: by helping your coworker, you are also helping other employees by making the workplace safer.

Q: Where can I find information about drug treatment programs?

A: For referrals to treatment programs, call **1-800-662-HELP**, or visit the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration online](https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/): <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>.

Also see the National Institute on Health (NIDA) [Step-by-Step Treatment Guides](https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/treatment#stepguides) at: <https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/treatment#stepguides> for information about the steps to take if you or someone you know has problems with drugs. Please note that NIDA does not provide medical advice. For medical advice, we strongly urge you to contact a qualified health care provider.