

Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Facts

SUD is a type of mental disorder in which individuals are unable to control their use of substances such as legal or illegal drugs, alcohol or medications. Symptoms can range from moderate to severe. Addiction is the most severe form of SUD and involves compulsively using a substance regardless of negative social, psychological and physical consequences.

Recovering from SUD is difficult, but it is not impossible. Support from your doctor, family, friends and those with lived experience can be beneficial. Engaging and participating in a professional treatment program can also be an important component of successful recovery.



Drugs and pregnancy

Most drugs can cross the placenta and affect the unborn child. Any use, even occasional, of some drugs during pregnancy may cause miscarriage, fetal distress or a range of other complications.

Drugs and driving

Driving safely requires mental alertness, clear vision, physical coordination and the ability to react appropriately. Drug use can negatively affect these abilities and therefore increase the risk of having an accident.

General signs and symptoms

Addiction to any substance including alcohol may include these general characteristics:

- » Feeling that you need the substance regularly, many times a day or by increased amounts
- » Making certain that you maintain a supply of the substance
- » Failing repeatedly in your attempts to stop using the substance
- » Doing things to obtain the substance that you normally wouldn't do, such as stealing
- » Feeling that you need the substance to deal with your problems
- » Driving or doing other activities that place you and others at risk of physical harm when you're under the influence of the substance

Recognizing substance use in teenagers

Signs that your teenager is using substances include:

- **School performance.** Your child suddenly shows an active dislike of school and looks for excuses to stay home.
- **Physical health.** Listlessness and apathy may indicate your child is using certain substances.
- **Appearance.** A sudden lack of interest in clothing, grooming or looks may be a warning sign of substance use.
- **Personal behavior.** Teenagers enjoy privacy, but exaggerated efforts to bar family members from entering their rooms or knowing where they go with their friends might indicate substance use.
- **Money.** Sudden requests for money without a reasonable explanation for its use, money stolen from previously safe places at home or items disappearing from your home.

Causes

Anyone can develop SUD and no one factor can predict whether someone will develop an addiction. Various factors such as genetic makeup, the person's environment, age, exposure to trauma and peer pressure can affect a person's likelihood of becoming addicted to a substance.

Risk factors

Certain factors increase the likelihood of developing SUD:

- **Mental disorder.** If you have another psychological problem such as depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or post-traumatic stress disorder for example, you could be at greater risk for developing SUD.
- **Social environment.** Peer pressure is a strong factor in whether someone begins using substances, particularly for young people.
- **Anxiety, depression and loneliness.** Using substances can become a way of coping with painful psychological feelings.
- **Genetics.** If you have family members with substance use problems, you're at greater risk of developing SUD.

- **Type of substance.** Some substances such as opioids and alcohol more quickly result in physical addiction. Alcohol and opioids also carry a high risk of unintentional overdose, which can lead to death.



Complications

Aside from the physical and psychological problems it causes, SUD can create many other disruptions:

- **Family.** Behavioral changes may cause marital or family strife.
- **Work.** Work performance may decline, and you may be absent from work more often.
- **Social.** You may lose or alienate friends.
- **School.** Academic performance and motivation to excel may suffer.
- **Legal.** Stealing to support your addiction and driving while impaired are just two of the possible legal problems SUD can cause.
- **Financial.** Spending money to support your addiction takes away money from other needs.
- **Health.** SUD and addiction have many physical consequences that vary depending on which substance you use.

When to seek medical advice

SUD is a chronic and relapsing disorder, like hypertension, asthma or diabetes, and requires long-term treatment. Relapse is expected. The sooner you seek help, the greater your chances are for long-term recovery. If you're initially reluctant to approach a doctor, help lines or hotlines may be a good place to start to learn about treatment.



Screening and diagnosis

Diagnosing SUD often starts at the family doctor level, often after one family member has raised concerns about another family member's behavior. A definitive SUD diagnosis usually occurs after an evaluation by a psychiatrist, psychologist or a specialized addiction counselor.

Treatment

Untreated SUD adds significant costs to families and communities, including those related to:

- **Reduced productivity and unemployment**
- **Violence and property crimes**
- **Court and criminal costs, prison expenses**
- **Emergency room visits**
- **Healthcare utilization**
- **Child abuse and neglect**
- **Lost child support**
- **Foster care and welfare costs**

One common belief is that people who struggle with SUD should be able to just stop using substances—if they are willing to change their behavior. However, SUD is a chronic disease, with relapses possible even after long periods of abstinence. Relapse can occur at rates similar to those with chronic medical illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension and asthma. Treatment for SUD is most successful when delivered over an extended period. Through treatment tailored to individual needs, people with SUD can recover and lead productive lives.



Coping skills

Along with counseling and attending self-help groups, there are other ways to cope with SUD. Your doctor or counselor can provide helpful information about ways to boost your chances of a successful recovery including (but not limited to):

- **Giving yourself time.** For most people it takes about three months before significant improvement occurs. Don't give up on your treatment program too soon.
- **Promptly seeking treatment for other mental health disorders.** People with other mental health problems, such as depression, are twice as likely to develop SUD. It is important to seek immediate treatment from a qualified mental health professional if you have any signs or symptoms of mental illness.
- **Avoiding high-risk situations.** Don't go back to the neighborhood where you used to obtain substances and stay away from individuals who use or sell them.

Helpful resources

- » Narcotics Anonymous www.na.org and www.na.org/meetingsearch/ provides educational information as well as meeting locations and times throughout the U.S.
- » Families Anonymous supports families and friends through local and online support group meetings. Learn more at www.familiesanonymous.org.
- » The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides a wealth of information on SUD and mental illness. Visit www.SAMHSA.gov.

