

Prescription Drug Abuse and Dependence

What is prescription drug abuse and dependence?

When prescription drugs are taken the right way, they are safe. Taking too much or taking them when they are not needed is drug abuse. Prescription drugs that may be abused include:

- Pain medicines
- Sleeping pills
- Medicines to treat anxiety
- Cough medicines
- Stimulants, which are medicines that increase energy and alertness

Abuse and dependence are patterns of using drugs that lead to serious personal, family and health problems. Abuse is when you keep taking the drug even though it causes a problem such as:

- Showing up late or missing work or school and not caring about things that used to matter to you
- Breaking rules or breaking the law
- Not keeping promises, arguing, or even getting violent with other people
- Doing things that are dangerous, such as driving while under the influence

You may also be abusing prescription medicine if you:

- Take them for reasons other than why they were prescribed
- Take more than the prescribed dose
- Continue to use them when you no longer have a need for the medicine

If you continue to abuse drugs, you can become dependent. When you are dependent on prescription drugs, you:

- Need to use more and more of the drug, or use it more often to get the same effects
- Lose control, which means you keep using drugs even though you know that it is harmful to you or others, or you can't stop using drugs when you try
- Crave drugs so much that you spend a lot of time and energy getting drugs, using drugs, and getting over the effects
- Have withdrawal symptoms when you stop using drugs

Dependence is also called addiction. Some prescription drugs are more addicting than others are. If you are concerned that you may become addicted to a prescription drug, talk to your healthcare provider about the right medicines for you.

What is the cause?

Drugs changes the way your body and brain work. When you use more of a drug than prescribed, your brain starts to get used to it. As a result, you think about drugs all the time, you don't feel good unless you use drugs, and you may act different when you use them. When you stop using drugs suddenly, the balance of chemicals in your brain changes, which causes the symptoms of withdrawal.

You have a higher risk of becoming dependent on drugs if you:

- Have a family history of drug or alcohol abuse
- Have abused alcohol or drugs in the past
- Are easily frustrated, have trouble dealing with stress, or feel like you aren't good enough
- Are regularly around people who use alcohol or drugs
- Have a mental health problem
- Have constant pain

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of prescription drug abuse or dependence depend on the kind of drug, how much and how often you use the drug. The symptoms can be mild to severe, such as:

- Trouble paying attention
- Confusion and memory problems
- Sudden mood changes, such as getting angry or irritable
- Trouble sleeping
- Loss of interest in things you used to enjoy

The symptoms of withdrawal can be mild to severe. You may have some of these symptoms when you stop using drugs:

- Restlessness and irritability
- Changes in your appetite or sleep
- Cravings for the drug

Other signs that you may be abusing or dependent on prescription drugs include:

- Seeing several different healthcare providers so that you can get more prescriptions
- Pretending to be in pain just to get pain medicine
- Forging prescriptions
- Taking medicine prescribed for others

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask how much and how often you take drugs. Be honest about your drug use. Your provider needs this information to give you the right treatment. He will also ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. You may have tests or scans to help make a diagnosis.

How is it treated?

Prescription drug abuse and dependence can be treated. For any treatment to be successful, you must want to stop using drugs. Do not try to use alcohol and other drugs to reduce withdrawal symptoms. Your healthcare provider may prescribe medicine to help you get through withdrawal. Your provider may suggest other ways to manage symptoms or problems that the prescriptions were meant to help.

If you are abusing or dependent on prescription drugs and want to quit, get help.

Self-help groups such as Narcotics Anonymous, support groups, and therapy may be helpful. You might be treated in a substance abuse treatment program. Your healthcare providers and counselors will work with you to develop a treatment program.

Recovery from dependence is a long-term process. Follow-up treatment is very important so that you don't go back to abusing drugs.

If you have overdosed, or are having severe withdrawal symptoms you will need to be treated in a hospital. You will also be treated for any health problems such as a heart attack, stroke, or other life-threatening problems.

How can I take care of myself?

The best way to help yourself is to see your healthcare provider and make plans to stop taking drugs. If you are already seeing a healthcare provider, it is important to take the full course of treatment he or she prescribes.

- **Get support.** Talk with family and friends. Consider joining a support group in your area.
- **Learn to manage stress.** Ask for help at home and work when the load is too great to handle. Find ways to relax, for example take up a hobby, listen to music, watch movies, or take walks. Try deep breathing exercises when you feel stressed.
- **Take care of your physical health.** Try to get at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Eat a healthy diet. Limit caffeine. If you smoke, try to quit. Exercise according to your healthcare provider's instructions.
- **Avoid situations where people are likely to use alcohol or drugs.**
- **Check your medicines.** To help prevent problems, tell your healthcare provider and pharmacist about all of the medicines, natural remedies, vitamins, and other supplements that you take. Take all medicines as directed by your provider or therapist. It is very important to take your medicine even when you are feeling and thinking well. Without the medicine, your symptoms may not improve or may get worse. Talk to your provider if you have problems taking your medicine or if the medicines don't seem to be working.
- **Contact your healthcare provider or therapist** if you have any questions or your symptoms seem to be getting worse.
- **Keep trying.** Many people try more than once to quit using drugs before they finally succeed. So, never say, "I can't." You CAN learn to live without drugs in your daily life.

Get emergency care if you or a loved one has serious thoughts of suicide or self-harm, violence, or harming others.

People and resources in your community that can help you include your healthcare providers, therapists, support groups, mental health centers, and alcohol or substance abuse treatment programs. You may want to contact:

- The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence
800-622-2255
<http://www.ncadd.org>
- The National Institute on Drug Abuse Referral Hotline
800-662-4357

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