

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) What is an addiction?



<https://www.drugabuse.gov/>

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What is an addiction?



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Not everyone who uses drugs becomes addicted. Each person's body and brain are different. People react to drugs differently. There's no rule about how soon someone becomes addicted. It can happen quickly or take time.

People don't plan to get addicted to drugs.

When people first take a drug, they might like how it makes them feel. They believe they can control how much and how often they take the drug. But drugs can take away people's control. Drugs can change the brain.

At first the drugs might make you feel good. But after time you might need to take the drug just to feel normal. You might start taking more just to get the same high. You might keep using the drug, even though it starts hurting your life. You might spend a lot of time trying to get more of the drug. Seeking and using drugs might start hurting your loved ones, but you can't stop. These are signs of an addiction.

An addiction can take over your life. Taking drugs can become more important than the need to eat or sleep. Getting and using drugs can become all you think about. The addiction can replace all the things you

used to enjoy. You might do almost anything to keep taking the drug, like steal or lie.

An addiction is a brain disorder.

- Drugs can change how the brain works.
- The brain changes can last for a long time.
- The changes can cause problems with a person's behavior. People with a drug addiction might be moody, have memory loss, or even have trouble thinking and making decisions.

An addiction is an illness, just as heart disease and cancer are illnesses. An addiction is not a weakness. It does not mean someone is a bad person. People from all backgrounds can get an addiction. It doesn't matter if you are rich or poor. It doesn't matter where you live. It doesn't matter if you went to college or not. An addiction can happen to anyone and at any age. But the chances are higher when a person starts using drug when they're young.

Read more about other things that make someone more likely to become addicted on the Easy-to-Read Drug Facts webpage, [What Makes Someone More Likely to Get Addicted?](#)

NEXT: [What are some signs and symptoms of someone with a drug use problem?](#)

What are some signs and symptoms of someone with a drug use problem?



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You can call **1-800-662-HELP (4357)** at any time to find drug treatment centers in your area.

People with drug problems might not act like they used to. They might:

- change their friends a lot
- spend a lot of time alone
- choose not to spend time with family and friends like they used to
- lose interest in their favorite things
- not take care of themselves—for example, not take showers, change clothes, or brush their teeth
- be really tired and sad
- have changes in eating habits (eating more or eating less)
- be very energetic, talk fast, or say things that don't make sense
- be in a bad mood
- quickly change between feeling bad and feeling good
- sleep at strange hours
- miss important appointments
- have problems at work or at school
- have problems in personal or family relationships

It's hard for people with an addiction to stop taking the drug on their own. They might try to stop taking the drug and then feel really sick. Then they might take the drug again to stop feeling sick. They might need help to stop using drugs.

Drug treatment can help. Read more on the Easy-to-Read DrugFacts webpage, [Treatment and Recovery](#).

NEXT: [How does drug use become an addiction?](#)

How does drug use become an addiction?

What's the connection between addiction and the brain?

Our brains want us to keep doing things that we need or enjoy—like eating tasty food. That's why you sometimes eat more dessert than you know you should. That's why a little child often shouts "again!" when you do something to make them laugh.

Drugs that people use or misuse excite the parts of the brain that make you feel good. But after you take a drug for a while, your brain gets used to it. Then you need to take more of the drug to get the same good feeling. Soon, your brain and body must have the drug to just feel normal. You feel sick and awful without the drug.

NEXT: [What makes someone more likely to get addicted to drugs?](#)

What makes someone more likely to get addicted to drugs?



Photo by © NIDA

- **Your body**
Everyone's bodies react to drugs differently. Some people like the feeling the first time they try a drug and want more. Other people hate how it feels and never try it again. Some are more likely to get addicted.
- **Using drugs when you're young**
When kids use drugs, it can change how their bodies and brains finish growing. Using drugs when you're young increases your chances of becoming addicted when you get older.
- **Mental health problems**
People who have mental health problems are more likely to get addicted. This is because drug use and mental health problems affect the same parts of the brain.
Some mental health problems might be:
 - Feeling so sad or worried about something that it is hard to live your life normally
 - having trouble paying attention
 - having quick mood changes

Some people might use drugs to try to feel better. Read more at the Easy-to-Read Drug Facts webpage, [Drug Use and Mental Health Problems Often Happen Together](#)

- **Hanging around other people who use drugs**
Friends or family members who use drugs can make you more likely to use drugs.
- **Trouble in school, trouble at work, trouble with making friends**
Trouble at school or work or trouble getting along with people, can make life hard. You might use drugs to try to get your mind off these problems or use drugs to make friends. Remember: true friends would not pressure you to use a drug.

NEXT: [Does addiction run in families?](#)

Does addiction run in families?

You know how your eyes can look like your father's eyes or your nose like your mother's? This is because you have a map in your body that you got from your parents before you were born. This map is called DNA and it is made up of genes. The genes are short parts of your DNA. Like genes you get from your parents for your eyes and nose, you can have genes that can increase your chance of becoming addicted to drugs.

But it's not all about genes. If children see a parent or family member using drugs, they might think it's okay. Kids learn behaviors by watching their parents or older brothers and sisters. Living with an adult with an addiction also causes a lot of problems in the house. Children might not get the care or attention they need. Children who don't feel loved have a greater chance of using drugs and becoming addicted. This can be a problem that continues through many generations. It does not matter if a family is rich, poor, or in between. It can happen to anyone.

The good news is that many children whose parents had drug problems don't become addicted when they grow up. The chances of developing an addiction are higher, but it doesn't have to happen. And you can protect yourself from this chance by not using drugs at all.

NEXT: [Why is it so hard to quit drugs?](#)

Why is it so hard to quit drugs?

Getting better from an addiction can take time. Someone with an addiction can feel scared of what will happen if they don't keep taking the drug. Some won't try quitting until they're forced to, because it seems too hard.

When someone stops using a drug, they might feel very sick for a while. They might feel a very strong need to take the drug again. It can be really hard to stop taking the drug when you feel that bad. To learn more, watch the video, [Why Are Drugs So Hard to Quit?](#)

It can be hard to get off drugs, but you don't have to do it alone. Support groups and treatment programs can help. You'll meet people who understand what you're going through. They can give you advice and cheer you on. And counselors can teach you how to handle life's problems without using drugs.

Doctors can also help you find medicines that make you feel less sick. For addictions to certain drugs, there are medicines that can help you feel like you don't need the drug as much. Visit the Easy-to-Read Drug Facts webpage [What are the types of treatment?](#) to learn more.

After you get treatment, you still have a lot to do. You have to:

- talk with a doctor about finding solutions for things that led to your drug use, like feeling sad or worrying about things
- relearn how to live without using drugs
- work on the problems your drug use caused with your friends and family, your job, and your money
- learn what makes you want to take drugs again, so you can stay away from those things

You also need to learn your triggers. A **trigger** is anything that makes you want to go back to using drugs. It can remind you of taking a drug and getting high. A trigger can be:

- a person
- a place
- a thing
- a feeling
- a picture
- something stressful
- a memory

People fighting addiction need to stay away from the triggers that can make them start using drugs again.