



"Psychology Works" Fact Sheet: Substance Abuse

What is a substance and what kinds of substances are abused?

To understand substance abuse, we first need to know what a "substance" is – and what kinds of substances can be abused.

- A substance is a drug
- Drugs that are abused are those that are highly reinforcing; because these drugs have positive effects, there is an increased likelihood that someone would want to keep using them
- Drugs may be reinforcing because they increase feelings of pleasure or happiness, or because they take away feelings of discomfort, sadness or pain
- There are many drugs that may be abused, including alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, and prescription medications
- Other drugs that may be abused include:
 - Cannabis (for example, marijuana or hashish)
 - Hallucinogens (for example, mushrooms or LSD)
 - Inhalants (for example, paint thinner or cooking spray)
 - Opioids (for example, heroin or Oxycontin)
 - Sedatives, hypnotics, and anxiolytics (or "downers"; for example Valium, Ativan or some sleeping medications)
 - Stimulants (or "uppers"; for example, Ritalin or Dexedrine)

What does it mean to 'abuse' a substance?

- Substance abuse falls under the larger category of substance use disorders
- The primary feature of substance use disorders is the continued use of a drug despite experiencing negative consequences associated with drug use



What kinds of consequences do people with a substance use disorder experience?

- **Social consequences** such as problems in relationships, getting into arguments with family members or friends about substance use, or neglecting responsibilities associated with various social roles such as being a parent, partner or friend
- **Occupational consequences** such as being unable to get to work on time, not going to work at all, or being unable to do or complete work tasks
- **Legal consequences** such as being arrested for driving under the influence, public intoxication or possessing and/or selling drugs
- **Physical consequences** such as cravings or strong desires to continue using a drug or experiencing withdrawal symptoms such as feeling sick or ill when the drug exits the body

What causes substance abuse?

- There is no single cause or reason why someone develops a substance use disorder and it is well known that there are multiple pathways to developing a substance use disorder
- Several risk factors for substance abuse have been identified and there is general agreement that risk factors fall within a biopsychosocial model, meaning that biological, psychological and social factors all contribute to an increased risk for developing substance abuse

What are some of the risk factors?

- **Biological factors include:** Genetic factors such as having a history of substance abuse in one's family. Men are also more likely than women to abuse substances. Biochemical changes in the brain also contribute to tolerance and withdrawal from substances, where the brain changes and adapts to the presence of the drug so that more is needed to achieve the same effect.
- **Psychological factors include:** Personality traits such as impulsivity or sensation seeking, difficulty coping with negative events, and having a history of substance use, past trauma, or childhood abuse or neglect. In addition, having other psychological diagnoses including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety, depression, and some personality disorders are also risk factors.
- **Social factors include:** Having friends or family members who abuse substances, peer pressure, earlier age of beginning to use substances, and being between the ages of 18 and 24 are all social risk factors. In addition, living in poverty or having drugs easily available are other risk factors for substance abuse.



How can substance abuse be treated?

- There are several evidence-based treatments available for helping people with substance abuse problems
- However, even before starting treatment, it is best if the person is motivated to make changes to their drug use. **Motivational Interviewing** is a treatment approach that focuses on helping people resolve their ambivalence about making changes to their substance use and increases their readiness and commitment to change. This approach can be particularly helpful in combination with other treatments.
- **Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT)** for substance abuse focuses on identifying triggers and consequences of substance use. Triggers might include things like an argument with a spouse, getting paid at the end of the week, or being around people who are using drugs. Consequences are the negative things that happen in response to using substances (as listed above). Once triggers are identified, treatment focuses on developing coping skills to manage high-risk situations that are associated with substance use such as using relaxation strategies, developing social skills to establish new networks of friends, or using assertiveness to refuse substances. In addition, it is often helpful to think differently about some situations so that they are less likely to trigger a desire to use substances.
- **Contingency management** focuses on providing rewards (perhaps in the form of a token gift or voucher such as a gift card) for attending treatment sessions and/or for abstaining from substance use at various steps. For example, an individual who is receiving inpatient treatment for cocaine abuse might receive gift cards to purchase snacks or other tokens from a shop in the hospital for remaining abstinent (e.g. they receive a gift card each time they provide a clean urine samples).
- **Self-help or mutual aid groups** are one of the most common types of treatment for substance abuse and are often used in combination with other treatments (including medication and/or one-on-one therapy such as CBT). Examples of self-help/mutual aid groups include Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, however these are not the only types of self-help or mutual aid groups available. There are also self-help/mutual aid groups for family members of individuals with substance abuse (e.g. Al-Anon). These groups are typically led by individuals who themselves have overcome substance abuse. Often, (but not always) these groups have a guiding principle or step-program whereby members follow a list of steps (e.g. 12 step programs) to help in their path to sobriety. Some of these groups also have a spiritual component while others take a secular approach to mutual support. Although there is a lack of research on all self-help groups, Alcoholics Anonymous has demonstrated effectiveness and the research shows that positive results are associated with participation in AA, including regular attendance at meetings and use of AA resources (12-steps, having a sponsor).



- Most people who start treatment and stick with it can be successful at stopping their drug use and improving their lives through better functioning at work, in their social relationships and with their psychological health. However, like many chronic illnesses, substance abuse requires ongoing care and many people have periods where they return to substance abuse during their recovery. Between 40 and 60% of those who receive treatment have some return of symptoms when treatment ends. This does not mean that treatment is not successful, but it does indicate that substance abuse treatment needs to be ongoing in some way, just as treatments for other illnesses (e.g., diabetes, asthma) are ongoing.

Are there medications for people with substance use disorders?

- There are medications available that address some of the physical effects of drug abuse, such as cravings and withdrawal symptoms. A physician or psychiatrist can provide more information about medications to help with substance use withdrawal symptoms.

How can I find out more information?

- For more information, go to the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) at www.ccsa.ca
- The Canadian Government National Anti Drug Strategy website provides information about Prevention, Treatment and Enforcement strategies. This information can be found at: <http://nationalantidrugstrategy.gc.ca/>
- The RCMP website has additional information about substances (drugs) and substance abuse in general which can be found at: <http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/cycp-cpcj/dr-al/index-eng.htm>
- The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) has several publications that can be located at www.camh.ca

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: factsheets@cpa.ca

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