Drug Abuse,
Frequently Asked Questions, NIDA

Drug addiction is a complex brain disease. It is characterized by compulsive, at times uncontrollable, drug craving, seeking, and use that persists even in the face of extremely negative results. Drug seeking becomes compulsive, in large part as a result of the effects of prolonged drug use on brain functioning and, thus, on behavior. For many people, drug addiction becomes chronic, with relapses possible even after long periods of being off the drug.

HOW QUICKLY CAN I BECOME ADDICTED TO A DRUG?

There is no easy answer to this. If and how quickly you might become addicted to a drug depends on many factors including the biology of your body. All drugs are potentially harmful and may have life-threatening consequences associated with their use. There are also vast differences among individuals in sensitivity to various drugs. While one person may use a drug many times and suffer no ill effects, another person may be particularly vulnerable and overdose or developing a craving with the first use. There is no way of knowing in advance how someone may react.

HOW DO I KNOW IF SOMEONE IS ADDICTED TO DRUGS?

If a person is compulsively seeking and using a drug despite negative consequences (such as loss of job, debt, physical problems brought on by drug abuse, or family problems) then he or she is probably addicted. Those who screen for drug problems, such as physicians, have developed the CAGE questionnaire. These four simple questions can help detect substance abuse problems:

- Have you ever felt you ought to **C**ut down on your drinking/drug use?
- Have people ever **A**nnoyed you by criticizing your drinking/drug use?
- Have you ever felt bad or **G**uilty about your drinking/drug use?
- Have you ever had a drink or taken a drug first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or get rid of a hangover (**E**ye-opener)?

WHAT ARE THE PHYSICAL SIGNS OF ABUSE OR ADDICTION?

The physical signs of abuse or addiction can vary depending on the person and the drug being abused. For example, someone who abuses marijuana may have a chronic cough or worsening of asthmatic conditions. THC, the chemical in marijuana responsible for producing its effects, is associated with weakening the immune system which makes the user more vulnerable to infections, such as pneumonia. Each drug has short-term and long-term physical effects. Stimulants like cocaine increase heart rate and blood pressure, whereas opioids like heroin may slow the heart rate and reduce breathing (*respiration*).

ARE THERE EFFECTIVE TREATMENTS FOR DRUG ADDICTION?

Drug addiction can be effectively treated with behavioral-based therapies and, for addiction to some drugs such as heroin or nicotine, medications may be used. Treatment may vary for each person depending on the type of drug(s) being used and multiple courses of treatment may be needed to achieve success. Research has revealed 13 basic principles that underlie effective drug addiction treatment. These are discussed in NIDA's Principles of Drug Addiction Treatment: A Research-Based Guide.

WHERE CAN I FIND INFORMATION ABOUT DRUG TREATMENT PROGRAMS?

- For referrals to treatment programs, visit the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration online at http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/.
- NIDA publishes an expanding series of treatment manuals, the “clinical toolbox,” that gives drug treatment providers research-based information for creating effective treatment programs.

WHAT IS DETOXIFICATION, OR “DETOX”?

Detoxification is the process of allowing the body to rid itself of a drug while managing the symptoms of withdrawal. It is often the first step in a drug treatment program and should be followed by treatment with a behavioral-based therapy and/or a medication, if available. Detox alone with no follow-up is not treatment.

WHAT IS WITHDRAWAL? HOW LONG DOES IT LAST?

Withdrawal is the variety of symptoms that occur after use of some addictive drugs is reduced or stopped. 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 be easily treated with medications to ease the symptoms. But treating withdrawal is not the same as treating addiction.

WHAT ARE THE COSTS OF DRUG ABUSE TO SOCIETY?

Beyond the raw numbers are other costs to society:

- Spread of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C either through sharing of drug paraphernalia or unprotected sex.
- Deaths due to overdose or other complications from drug use.
- Effects on unborn children of pregnant drug users.
- Other effects such as crime and homelessness.

IF A PREGNANT WOMAN ABUSES DRUGS, DOES IT AFFECT THE FETUS?

- Many substances including alcohol, nicotine, and drugs of abuse can have negative effects on the developing fetus because they are transferred to the fetus across the placenta. For example, nicotine has been connected with premature birth and low birth weight, as has the use of cocaine. Scientific studies have shown that babies born to marijuana users were shorter, weighed less, and had smaller head sizes than those born to mothers who did not use the drug. Smaller babies are more likely to develop health problems.
- Whether a baby's health problems, if caused by a drug, will continue as the child grows, is not always known. Research does show that children born to mothers who used marijuana regularly during pregnancy may have trouble concentrating, when older. Our research continues to produce insights on the negative effects of drug use on the fetus.

HOW CAN I RECEIVE EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS REGARDING DRUG ABUSE?

NIDA produces a variety of educational materials for the general public and healthcare providers.

Information courtesy of NIDA (National Institute of Drug Abuse), part of the NIH (National Institute of Health)

Document Released: 12/20/2004 Document Re-Released: 04/05/2010
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