

# The Lows of Using

We see the impact of drug and alcohol abuse almost daily in entertainment news media. In fact, most people are touched in some way by drug and alcohol abuse, whether by themselves, family, friends, children, or co-workers... and, in some cases, never know it.

Drug addiction is a complex disease, and quitting takes more than good intentions. No single factor can predict whether a person will become addicted to drugs, including alcohol, nicotine, and prescription drug abuse. Risk for addiction is influenced by multiple factors that include biology, social environment, and age. Like other chronic conditions, the more risk factors one has, the greater the chance of addiction.


## Addiction and the Brain

Addiction is a chronic, often relapsing brain disease that causes compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences to the addicted individual and to those around them. Although the initial decision to take drugs is voluntary for most people, the brain changes that occur over time challenge a person's self-control and ability to resist intense impulses urging them to take drugs.

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## The Brain on Drugs

While different drugs do different things, they all affect the brain.

- **NICOTINE** is an addictive stimulant found in cigarettes and other forms of tobacco. Tobacco smoke increases a user's risk of cancer, emphysema, bronchial disorders, and cardiovascular disease. The mortality rate associated with tobacco addiction is shocking. Tobacco use killed approximately 100 million people during the 20th century and, if current smoking trends continue, the cumulative death toll for this century has been projected to reach 1 billion.
  - **ALCOHOL** consumption can damage the brain and most body organs. Areas of the brain that are especially vulnerable to alcohol-related damage are the cerebral cortex (largely responsible for our higher brain functions, including problem-solving and decision-making), the hippocampus (important for memory and learning), and the cerebellum (important for movement coordination). Excessive alcohol consumption is responsible for over 79,000 deaths and 2.3 million years of potential life lost in the U.S. each year.
  - **MARIJUANA** is the most commonly abused illicit substance. This drug impairs short-term memory and learning, the ability to focus attention, and coordination. It also increases heart rate, can harm the lungs, and can increase the risk of psychosis in those with an underlying vulnerability.
  - **INHALANTS** are volatile substances found in many household products, such as oven cleaners, gasoline, spray paints, and other aerosols, that induce mind-altering effects. Inhalants are extremely toxic and can damage the heart, kidneys, lungs, and brain. Even a healthy person can suffer heart failure and death within minutes of a single session of prolonged sniffing of an inhalant.
  - **COCAINE** is a short-acting stimulant, which can lead abusers to "binge" (to take the drug many times in a single session). Cocaine abuse can lead to severe medical consequences related to the heart and the respiratory, nervous, and digestive systems.
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## Did You Know?

- **FACT:** Most people who start smoking in their teens become regular smokers before they're 18.
- **FACT:** Prescription pain medications are involved in more overdose deaths than heroin and cocaine combined.
- **FACT:** Repeated drug use can reset the brain's pleasure meter, so that without the drug, you feel hopeless and sad. Eventually, everyday things that you enjoy, like spending time with family or participating in a hobby, doesn't make you happy anymore.
- **FACT:** Binge drinking (consuming 4 or more drinks per occasion for women; 5 or more drinks per occasion for men) is responsible for over half of the deaths and two-thirds of the years of potential life lost due to excessive drinking, and is associated with many health and social problems, including alcohol-impaired driving, interpersonal violence, and risky sexual activity.
- **FACT:** One out of every 10 people in the U.S. has a drinking problem, and 68% are full-time workers. One in five workers has covered for fellow employee's drinking at one time.

### Abuse of alcohol, nicotine, and drugs have negative costs for individuals, families, workplaces, and society.

Estimates of the total overall costs of substance abuse in the U.S., including medical, economic, criminal, and social impact, exceed half a trillion dollars a year. This includes approximately \$181 billion for illicit drugs, \$193 billion for tobacco and \$235 billion for alcohol. As staggering as these numbers are, they do not fully describe the scope of destructive public health and safety implications of drug abuse and addiction, like family disintegration, loss of employment, failure in school, domestic violence, and child abuse (NIDA, 2011).

## People of all ages suffer the harmful consequences of drug abuse and addiction.

- **BABIES** exposed to legal and illegal drugs in the womb may be born premature and underweight. This drug exposure can slow the child's intellectual development and affect behavior later in life.
- **ADOLESCENTS** who abuse drugs often act out, do poorly academically, and drop out of school. They are at risk of unplanned pregnancies, violence, and infectious diseases.
- **ADULTS** who abuse drugs often have problems thinking clearly, remembering, and paying attention. They often develop poor social behaviors as a result of their drug abuse, and their work performance and personal relationships suffer.
- **PARENTS'** drug abuse often means chaotic, stress-filled homes and child abuse and neglect, which may set the stage for drug abuse in the next generation.

### Where to Turn for Help

- **Speak with your employer about Employee Assistance Programs** that may be available to you.
- **Call Blues On Call<sup>SM</sup>** at 1-888-BLUE(2583)-428 anytime 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for confidential support from a specially-trained Health Coach.
- **Call 1-800-662-HELP.** Different types of treatments are available to meet your specific needs. You can get referrals to treatment programs by calling 1-800-662-HELP (a confidential hotline), or by visiting the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration on line at [findtreatment.samhsa.gov](http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov).