

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Responsible Use of Drugs and Alcohol

Most things in life have the potential for benefit or for harm, depending on the way we approach them. Alcohol and other drugs are no exception.

Many people enjoy a drink at meals and social gatherings. Taking prescription drugs can be a health-preserving measure for many people. However, it's easy to misuse these substances.

We can misuse medicine by taking too much or for longer than the recommended course of medication. Mixing drugs and/or alcohol inappropriately can also contribute to accidents, including overdoses, and other serious health problems, especially among seniors.

What does "addicted" mean?

When drinking and other drug use begins to control a person, health professionals consider it an addiction. Being addicted implies that the person is compelled (physically, mentally or both) to drink or take drugs regularly. When an addicted person doesn’t use the substance in question, they experience distress.

People who drive while drunk, or who drink even though they know it may worsen a medical condition, are said to "abuse" alcohol. Those who feel they cannot get through the day without drinking or using drugs are likely addicted. Over time, an addict will often need more of a substance to obtain the same effect. When use of the drug is stopped, they feel intense craving and withdrawal.

Withdrawal can begin with mild irritability but can progress to more severe, even life-threatening symptoms, such as seizures. If someone has been using large amounts of alcohol or drugs for a long time, it can be dangerous to quit without professional support.

Why do people turn to alcohol and drugs?

Some experiment with drugs or alcohol out of curiosity or because they want to fit in. Many people who try alcohol and drugs don’t become addicted, although some illegal drugs (crack cocaine, for example) can create dependency almost immediately.

Family history of addiction puts a person at higher risk. A variety of biological, social and personal factors also come into play. Addiction frequently occurs in those who have difficulty coping with boredom, anger or anxiety, or who lack self-confidence. Chemical use is often a way for socially anxious people to feel more confident.

Alcohol and drug use often goes hand-in-hand with a difficult or challenging time in life. It's easy, at such times, to see events as problems and drugs or alcohol as the solution.

How to know if you have a problem

The following questions can help you decide if your drug or alcohol use is a problem:

1. Do you have concerns about the way you use alcohol or other drugs?

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2. Are you using an illegal drug or obtaining a prescription drug illegally? Do you use more than one doctor to fill the same prescription?

3. Are you using medicine regularly without (or against) the advice of a physician?

4. Have you often failed to do what was expected at home, work or school because drugs or drinking made you feel listless, irritable or sick?

5. Do you need to drink or take something to help you through new situations or social occasions? Do you need it to get started in the morning or to sleep at night?

6. Is a party not a party unless you are under the influence?

7. Have you ever had memory lapses after using alcohol or drugs?

8. Have you hurt yourself or someone else while you were under the influence? For example, did you damage property or abuse people physically or verbally?

9. Has a friend, relative, co-worker or health worker been concerned about your drinking or drug use? Has anyone suggested that you cut down or quit?

10. Have you ever tried to cut down or stop and found that you couldn't?

If you answered yes to two or more questions, you may have a problem.

What can you do?

Admitting to being addicted is similar to admitting that a relationship isn't working. The thought of change or an end to the relationship is so overwhelming that it's easier to convince ourselves everything is fine. In some situations it may take a specific incident or "rock bottom" experience before a person can really admit to an addiction.

Coming to terms with the problem is easier when we realize we don't have to fix the problem all at once or alone. Discussing it with someone who understands and taking it one step at a time is an empowering process.

Once a person has recognized the problem, seek help. Call your doctor, a counselor, a centre for addictions, or a support group such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Doctors can help in assessment or referrals to appropriate resources.

An ounce of prevention

The following tips can help a person avoid the pitfalls of problematic drug or alcohol use:

- Know what it means to "drink moderately." According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, moderate alcohol consumption is defined as having up to 1 drink per day for women and up to 2 drinks per day for men. It is also important to have days without drinking between days with drinking.
- In certain circumstances and for certain people, the use of alcohol is either not recommended or is inappropriate. People who are consistently unable to control their drinking should not drink at all.
- As a host, friend or relative, remember to support your non-drinking guests. Avoid serving alcohol to people who are noticeably intoxicated, and make sure these people have a safe ride home.
- Read and follow label instructions on drugs carefully. Be sure to question your pharmacist if there is something you don't understand.
- If you have a chronic health condition or disability, explore drug-free ways to address your symptoms.
- Teach your children responsible use of alcohol and drugs.
- The "just say no" approach is often not enough. Conversations should be open and non-judgmental. Respect that your children and others want to make appropriate decisions.

Overcoming addiction is difficult emotionally and physically. If possible, educate yourself about the appropriate use of drugs and alcohol. Avoiding the problem altogether or nipping in it in the early stages are a lot easier and healthier than the alternatives.