

# Substance Abuse and Addiction

Addiction is a serious illness. Health, relationships, finances, and careers—all can be ruined by substance abuse and addiction, which is the leading cause of preventable illnesses and premature death. The most prevalent drugs of abuse are alcohol, marijuana, hallucinogens, inhalants, and nicotine. Other abused substances are stimulants, heroin, and sedatives.



## SUBSTANCES AND THEIR EFFECTS

### *Alcohol*

The recklessness that often results from excessive drinking is a leading cause of serious injuries and accidental deaths. Alcohol is the most common cause of preventable birth defects. Excessive drinking can also lead to alcoholism, an illness that tends to run in families and is often associated with depression.

### *Marijuana*

Use of marijuana, the most frequently used illicit drug, can lead to a loss of ambition and an inability to carry out plans or to function effectively. It is associated with short-term memory loss, accelerated heartbeat, high blood pressure, difficulty concentrating and processing information, and lapses in judgment.

### *Hallucinogens*

Hallucinogens include LSD (“acid”) and designer drugs such as Ecstasy. Effects include hallucinations and feelings of euphoria. Use of LSD may lead to stressful flashbacks and even death by dehydration or an exceptionally high fever.

### *Inhalants*

Inhalants are breathable chemicals, including glue, paint thinner, and lighter fluid, that are commonly abused by teenagers. They reach the lungs and bloodstream very quickly and can cause heart failure, suffocation, and death.

### *Nicotine*

Nicotine has addictive properties similar in severity to those of heroin. Smoking may lead to lung cancer, heart attacks, emphysema, high blood pressure, and ulcers. Withdrawal involves feelings of irritability, frustration, anger, anxiety, insomnia, and depression.

## TREATMENT

The first step on the road to recovery is recognition of the problem. Unfortunately, denial and a lack of understanding about addiction often complicate recovery. People are often prompted to seek treatment when concerned friends and family intervene.

Because substance abuse and addiction affect many aspects of a person’s life, a combination of medication and therapy is often most effective. Other treatments include hospitalization, highly structured therapeutic communities, and outpatient programs.

In addition to treatment, self-help groups are available for people with substance abuse problems (Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous) and their families (Al-Anon or Nar-Anon Family Group).

Adapted from “Let’s Talk Facts About Substance Abuse and Addiction,” produced by the American Psychiatric Association.

Be sure to visit the American Psychiatric Association’s Web site at [www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org).