

What You Need to Know...



Alcohol and Drug Abuse, Addiction and Co-Occurring Disorders

Alcohol and drug abuse disorders constitute one of our society's greatest health concerns.

Alcohol and Drug Abuse and Addiction Prevalence

Alcohol and other drug abuse and addiction are major problems for the nation's youth, adults and families. According to the 1999 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, an estimated 14.8 million Americans are current users (use within past 30 days) of illicit drugs such as sedative-hypnotics or barbiturates, opiates, hallucinogens and stimulants. (SAMHSA 2000)

An estimated 3.6 million people met the diagnostic criteria for dependence on illicit drugs (SAMHSA 2000) Alcoholism, or alcohol addiction, is a progressive disorder and afflicts approximately 8.2 million adults and youth in the U.S. (SAMHSA 2000)

Alcohol and other drug abuse and addictions are major social problems. They affect both men and women, impact all cultures, and are experienced by people of all ages. In the United States, the rates are lower in women than in men, higher in young adults (18-29) than in seniors (65 or more). The incidence of addiction and other substance abuse related problems, as well as the types of substances abused, vary among the major U.S. ethnic groups.

According to the 1999 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, about 14.8 million Americans had used an illicit drug—a stimulant (upper), a sedative (downer), or a hallucinogen—within the thirty days prior to the survey. Drug addiction could have been diagnosed at that time in about 3.6 million people over the age of 12, including 1.5 million people addicted to both illicit drugs and alcohol.

Alcohol, while legal when used by adults, can be misused, abused and lead to addiction. An estimated 8.2 million adults and 3 million youth in this country suffer from alcoholism (alcohol addiction), which is a chronic, relapsing disorder. Many more use alcohol dangerously. About 45 million people, including 6.8 million under age 21, had “binged” (taken 5 or more drinks) once during the 30 days before the study. More than 12 million individuals, including 2.1 million youth, were “heavy drinkers” who had taken 5 or more drinks for 5 or more days.

Risk Factors for Substance Abuse Problems

The causes of alcohol or other drug abuse and addiction are complex, with heredity, environment, and social factors all playing a part. However, some specific risk factors are associated with substance abuse by youth. These risk factors are:

- Ineffective parenting
- A lack of rewarding and nurturing relationships
- Poor social and coping skills
- Failure in school
- The perception that parents, teachers, and other key adults in the community approve of drug abusing behavior
- A chaotic home environment
- Inappropriately shy and/or aggressive behavior
- Affiliation with deviant peers

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It is particularly important to address risk factors early. The younger a person starts drinking or using drugs, the more likely that person is to develop an addiction. In fact, young people who begin to drink or use drugs before the age of 15 are 4 times more likely to become addicted than if they wait until they are 21 to drink, regardless of other hereditary or environmental factors.

Signs and Symptoms of Abuse and Addiction

While a professional assessment is necessary to accurately diagnose a substance abuse or addiction problem, the CAGE instrument provides a self-administered tool for alcohol and other drug abuse screening in educational and primary care settings. The CAGE is comprised of four questions related to behavior surrounding drinking, not directly to clinical diagnostic issues.

C – Have you ever felt the need to **C**ut down on your drinking/drug use?

A – Do you get **A**nnoyed at criticism by others about your drinking/drug use?

G – Have you ever felt **G**uilty about your drinking/drug use or something you have done while drinking or using other drugs?

E – **E**ye-opener: Have you ever felt the need for a drink early in the morning?

One positive answer provides an indication that the person may be at risk for developing a problem with alcohol or other drugs. Feedback about this potential problem can provide valuable information to an individual, especially if that person has a family history of alcoholism or other drug addiction or has other risk factors for his or her own substance abuse problems.

Prevention

Effective prevention programs teach skills and promote the development of factors that are known to help reduce the risk of drug use. These protective factors include

- Strong bonds with family
- Involved parents who communicate rules clearly
- Strong bonds with institutions that support society (such as family, school, and religious organizations)
- Success in school
- Belief that drug use is unacceptable

Recovery

Achieving abstinence from using drugs is the primary goal of recovery. The recovery process is enhanced for some people by involvement in individual and group therapy to increase understanding of the addiction process, behavior and motivations, enhance self-esteem and teach life skills. Self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous offer the recovering person a supporting network of peers struggling with similar issues. Al-Anon and Ala-Teen groups assist family members in dealing with the issues resulting from the impact of addiction and the changes that take place during recovery.

Related Mental Health Issues

Co-occurring mental health and substance abuse disorders are common. More than half (52) the people surveyed who had ever been diagnosed with alcohol abuse or dependence had also experienced a mental disorder at some time in their lives. An even larger proportion (59%) of people with a history of other drug abuse or dependence also had experienced a mental disorder. Mental health problems often predate substance abuse problems by 4-6 years; alcohol or other drugs may be used as a form of self-medication to alleviate the symptoms of the mental disorder. In some cases, substance abuse precedes the development of mental health problems. For instance, anxiety and depression may be brought on as a response to stressors from broken relationships, lost employment, and other situations directly related to a drug-using lifestyle.

For a free and confidential mental health screening, go on-line to www.mhacolorado.org.

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