



UNDERSTANDING DRUG ADDICTION

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Short guides to understanding addiction and mental health

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It is possible to become addicted to both illegal drugs and some prescribed medications. Drug addiction, sometimes known as substance addiction or abuse, tends to build up over time. Taking drugs may once have seemed to provide occasional fun, but it can start to cause feelings of misery and take over from other, more enjoyable, parts of your life.

As with other forms of addiction, struggling with drug use can make you feel very worried, unwell, or anxious. Here we will explore the signs that you might be experiencing drug addiction, and who you should speak to get the treatment, advice and the support you might require.



WHAT IS DRUG ADDICTION?

When we talk about drugs, we are referring to illegal drugs such as cannabis, cocaine or heroin. Addiction can also occur to legal, prescription-only medications including strong pain relievers.

Some teenagers will try drugs alone or with their friends. Drugs can alter the way you feel to provide feelings of happiness, relaxation or excitement. However, taking drugs is risky. The production of illegal drugs is unregulated, and taking a medication that is not prescribed for you, or taking it at a higher dose than recommended, can cause unexpected side effects or even damage your vital organs.

Drugs can commonly become addictive. Having an addiction to drugs may mean that you have a very strong desire to take the drug, feel that you have no control over whether you take it, or take it in excess or to a point at which it could be harmful to your health or overall safety.

Over time, you may find that you need to take more of a substance to experience the same effect or 'high' that you desire. Drugs stimulate the reward centres in the brain, meaning that if you stop taking the drug, you can experience unpleasant feelings of withdrawal including frustration, irritability or restlessness. Drug withdrawal can also cause physical side effects including vomiting, flu-like symptoms, diarrhoea, aches and pains and exhaustion. These symptoms can increase your desire to take the drug again, because doing so will soothe how you feel. However, this leads to a vicious cycle of addiction and dependence, making it challenging to stop taking the drug.

You do not need to be taking drugs every day to develop dependence. However, if you feel that being able to buy and take drugs has become very important to you, or if you are rejecting your friends, hobbies or school work in favour of taking drugs, then you could be experiencing drug dependence.

THE SYMPTOMS OF DRUG ADDICTION

There are often certain symptoms or signs that might indicate that you, or someone you know, has become addicted to one or more drugs. These include:

- Taking a drug, such as pain relief, even when it is no longer needed to treat pain
- Taking a drug that is not prescribed for you
- Regularly taking illegal drugs
- Developing 'tolerance' or needing to take more of a drug to get the desired effect
- Feeling that you wouldn't be able to stop taking the drug if you wanted to





- Being unable to stop taking the drug even if you can see that it is affecting your relationships, hobbies, or schoolwork
- Spending a lot of time thinking about drugs, for example becoming obsessed with when you can buy more, when you can take the drug, or how it will make you feel
- Withdrawing from friends and family, or having more arguments than usual
- Changes in personality, including increased aggression
- Loss of interest in hobbies and activities you previously enjoyed
- Problems concentrating at school
- Worsening academic achievement
- No longer going to school or work
- Increased need for money which might result in borrowing or stealing to fund the purchase of drugs

- Secretive behaviour
- Changes in pupil size in the eye, or bloodshot eyes
- Appetite changes, including eating more or less, feeling hungrier than usual or not wanting to eat much
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Lack of personal hygiene and self-care.

There are also some common signs of drug withdrawal, including:

- Tremors or being shaky
- Sweating more than usual
- Being irritable or aggressive
- Feeling anxious or depressed
- Changes in energy levels such as feeling more energetic than usual or being tired and sluggish
- Nausea (feeling sick) or vomiting
- Cold and flu-like symptoms
- Change in temperature
- Sleeping more or having difficulty sleeping
- Feeling paranoid
- Becoming confused.

If you have noticed any of the above symptoms or signs of addiction or withdrawal, it is important to seek advice from a healthcare professional. They will be able to help you begin to understand and manage your drug addiction.



WHAT CAUSES DRUG ADDICTION?

When you take a drug, the chemicals contained within it cause the release of a natural messenger called dopamine. Dopamine activates the brain's reward centres, making you feel good at the time. However, as the drug wears off, the dopamine levels fall and you may start to experience withdrawal. As withdrawal feels very unpleasant, someone who is addicted will feel the uncontrollable urge to take the drug again to rid themselves of the unpleasant feelings. When drug use continues in this way, the response in the reward centre of the brain reduces, and this means that more of the drug is required to get the same high. This is known as tolerance. An individual may therefore start to use a drug more frequently and in greater quantities to get the high they desire. This results in greater health risks and could even lead to death in some cases.

The likelihood of becoming addicted to drugs may vary depending on:



- How easy it is for you to get hold of illegal or prescription drugs
- Whether anyone in your friendship group or family uses drugs
- If you can afford to buy drugs
- The age at which you start taking drugs, as earlier drug use may increase the chance of addiction occurring
- If you are exposed to traumatic experiences including abuse, stressful events, or peer pressure.

HOW DO I RECOGNISE DRUG ADDICTION?

If you are wondering if you may have an addiction to one or more drugs, you may have noticed some of the symptoms listed above. In addition to this, you may also find you:

- Think about drugs all the time
- Cannot stop taking drugs even if you try to
- Have increased the amount of money you spend on drugs
- Use riskier behaviours including stealing money or stealing items to sell to make money
- Steal other people's medications
- Notice your relationships or friendships have broken down
- Only make plans that will allow you to take drugs
- Have a significant change in your mood. You may feel anxious, depressed, angry, stressed, or have thoughts of hurting yourself.



It can be hard to admit to yourself that you have an addiction. If you are unsure, you may find it helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do you regularly use drugs that are not prescribed for you?
2. Do you take your prescription medications at a higher dose than your doctor advised you to?
3. Do you feel like you take drugs because you have to, rather than because it feels enjoyable or is something you want to do?

4. Has taking drugs led to you no longer keep up with schoolwork or losing your social life?
5. Do you worry about your drug use?
6. Are you trying to hide the extent of your drug use from others?
7. Is taking drugs leading to risky or other illegal behaviours?

If you have answered yes to any of the above, or if you think you have some signs of drug addiction, you should seek support and advice from a parent, teacher or health-care professional.



HOW CAN I MANAGE AN ADDICTION TO DRUGS?

If you think you have an addiction to drugs, you are likely to need the support of a specialist to break the addiction cycle. Because of the chemicals contained within drugs, and the effect they have on the brain, stopping a drug can be very difficult to do alone. In the same way that people are entitled to receive treatment for a physical illness, you are entitled to receive care for help with an addiction.

It can be helpful to begin by seeking advice from your doctor. They can listen in confidence to your experience with drugs, and then recommend services or treatments that may help you to reduce and stop your drug use.

The following tips are only to be considered once you have received medical advice and/or treatment regarding drug dependence.



Aim for abstinence



Once you have successfully managed to stop taking drugs, it is advisable to avoid taking them again. This is known as abstinence. To successfully abstain from taking drugs, you may need to avoid situations in which you might be tempted to take something, or walk away if you find yourself in a situation in which drugs are offered or available. This might include being aware of situations which might have a higher risk, such as parties, events where alcohol is present, or with certain groups of people.

You may find it helpful to take up an old hobby or start a new one, try to catch up with friends who you may have lost touch with, or look for new activities that may be a good distraction.

Get support from family and friends

It can be hard to talk to friends and family about drugs and addiction, but having the support of those around you may help you to abstain from taking drugs. If someone in your family takes a prescription medication, they should take steps to lock it away so that you are not tempted to take it.

Friends can support you by inviting you to safe social events or activities that will help you to find enjoyment without the use of drugs.



Join a support group

In Ireland, support groups are available to help those affected by drug addiction. A list of support services is available at the end of this article. At a group, you can receive support from people who understand what you are going through or are recovering from.

I HAVE A FRIEND WHO MIGHT HAVE A DRUG ADDICTION. WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP THEM?

It can be very upsetting to have a friend who shows signs of substance dependence or misuse. It is not your responsibility to try to manage their addiction, but you may be able to offer support to help them tackle their drug use. If someone has become dependent on drugs, they will need to seek professional support from a doctor or addiction specialist.

However, if they are using drugs occasionally without addiction, you may be able to help them talk about their drug use. To start a conversation about drug use, you could:



- Say that you feel worried that your friend may be using drugs in an unsafe or worrying manner
- Ask if your friend is concerned about their drug use
- Find out if drugs are making your friend feel unwell or out of control
- Ask if they would want to cut down on drug use
- Suggest that your friend seeks help from a parent, teacher, counsellor, or healthcare professional
- Give ideas of different activities that you could do together, such as watching a movie or going shopping, that will not involve drug use.

If a friend denies there is a problem, becomes cross with you, or rejects your offers of help, try not to take it personally. If you remain worried, you must seek help from an adult including a parent, teacher, or your friend's parents.

I THINK MY CHILD MIGHT HAVE A DRUG ADDICTION, WHAT ARE THE SIGNS?

Often, the signs of drug use may not become obvious for some time. However, there can be certain patterns and behaviours that you might notice. These include:

- Mixing with others who are taking drugs
- Mood swings including irritability, low mood, or anxiety
- Problems at school such as dropping grades and truancy
- Unusually poor behaviour and attitude, including behaving irresponsibly
- Breakdown of familial relationships or friendships
- Stealing money or possessions
- Issues with sleep, including sleeping too much or insomnia
- Secretive behaviour
- Appearing unwell
- Unusual items in their possession, such as burnt foil or ripped rolling paper packets
- Symptoms that might suggest they are under the influence of drugs, including increased confidence or a visible boost in energy, loss of coordination, aggression, changes to pupils or bloodshot eyes, loss of inhibitions, or paranoia.
- Symptoms that might suggest withdrawal including increased sweating, shaking, vomiting or confusion.



WHAT SHOULD I DO IF MY CHILD HAS A DRUG ADDICTION?

If you are concerned that your child is struggling with substance misuse or might have an addiction to drugs, it is important to approach the conversation with them gently. Often, individuals with a drug addiction will try to hide it, and when challenged they may become volatile or defensive. Try to listen without judgement, and avoid making accusations. Although there will be certain rules and boundaries within the home, your child needs to know that you are there for them and that they have your support. Once a conversation has been started, your child may be more willing to talk to you about how they are feeling or their experience and use of drugs.

If your child is under the influence of drugs, a conversation is unlikely to be productive, so instead wait for a calmer moment.





If possible, make an appointment with a doctor on behalf of your child. If your child will permit it, accompanying them to the consultation can be helpful. A doctor can recommend a treatment plan and offer any medical assistance that may be required for abstinence to occur. If your child resists stopping their drug use, you may also need to seek counselling or specialist addiction support for them.

You may also find it helpful to talk to your child's teachers, the school counsellor, or any youth workers or sports' coaches who work with your child. Mental health and addiction charities may also be able to offer valuable advice.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The use of illegal, controlled or prescription medications or drugs can lead to addiction in young people. In addition, it can negatively impact mental health and cause physical illness, too. Drug addiction can be difficult to overcome, and specialist support is often required to break the cycle of substance misuse. If you think you might be struggling with drug use or addiction, it is important to be honest with yourself and seek help from a doctor or addiction specialist. If you are able to, speak to your friends or family about what you are going through. They may be able to offer practical and emotional support while you also receive specialist help to manage your addiction.



YSPI Crisis Information:

[ineedhelp.ie](https://www.ineedhelp.ie)

Narcotics Anonymous (NA):

01 6728000

info@na-ireland.org

[na-ireland.org](https://www.na-ireland.org)

Youth Drug and Alcohol Service (YODA):

01 466 5040 [hse.ie](https://www.hse.ie)

Substance Abuse Service Specific to Youth (SASSY):

SASSY@hse.ie

HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline:

1800 459 459



HELP AND ASSISTANCE

If you are concerned about yourself, friends or family you should contact your GP or Out of Hours Service immediately.

You can also get immediate support and information 24/7 by

 **FREETEXT HELP TO 50015**

Texting 50015 is free of charge from any network and you can text this number even if you have no credit. This service is fully confidential and YSPI has no information on mobile numbers that use the FreeText service



For information on:

- Emergency Contacts
- National Helplines
- Local Support Groups
- Directions to your nearest GP or out of hours clinic
- Directions to your nearest safe place or refuge

 **WWW.INNEEDHELP.IE**

Always call 999 if someone is seriously ill or injured, and their life is at risk.

Gardaí / Ambulance / Fire call 999 or 112

ABOUT YOUTH SUICIDE PREVENTION IRELAND

Youth Suicide Prevention Ireland was founded in 2007 as there were no national charities focusing specifically on the problems and issues of youth suicide and self-harm in Ireland. We now provide a range of services aimed at mental health awareness and suicide prevention amongst teenagers.



Our main programme is **“Let’s Talk About Mental Health”** (www.letstalk.ie). This is a programme for students, teachers, parents and those who work with young people in schools, colleges, GAA clubs and youth organisations around Ireland.

Let’s Talk About Mental Health is a comprehensive mental health awareness and suicide prevention programme for ages 16+. As part of the programme we also provide a video workshop presented by John Sharpson that any organisation can book through our website at www.letstalk.ie/video.php.

We provide a wide range of free information including our “Let’s Talk About Mental Health” magazine delivered to schools and organisations as well as the “Coping With” series of mental health guides.

We also operate a 24/7 FreeText Crisis Information Service and fund a Youth Crisis Counselling Service at www.youthcrisiscounselling.ie.

Full details are available at www.yspi.ie



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1. Understanding Alcohol Addiction
2. Understanding Drug Addiction
3. Understanding Gaming Addiction
4. Understanding Gambling Addiction
5. Understanding Pornography Addiction
6. Understanding Sex Addiction
7. Understanding Consent

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