

Addiction

What is addiction?

There are many myths about addiction. To prevent addiction or recognize the signs so it can be treated, it's important to understand what addiction really is and what it is not. First, let's look at what it is not.

What addiction is not:

- **It's not a moral failing.** Addiction can cause behaviors that a person regrets, but this is the effect of the addiction itself, not a lack of morals.
- **It's not limited just to alcohol, pain medicine (like opioids), or illegal drugs.** A person can have an addiction to a variety of behaviors. A few examples include gambling, bulimia (eating and purposely throwing up), and pornography.
- **It's not the same as dependence or tolerance with opioid pain medicines.** Over time, your body can adjust to opioids so you may need a higher dose or you may have withdrawal symptoms when the medicine is stopped. [See page 2](#) to learn about dependence and tolerance with opioids.

What addiction is:

Addiction is a disease that affects how the brain processes rewards, motivation, and memories — and it causes symptoms that affect a person's body, mind, and spirit. Addiction causes a person to seek reward or relief in an unhealthy way through a behavior or substance. Addiction can cause strong cravings and a loss of control — it feels impossible to stop, even when the substance or behavior causes problems. It can affect a person's emotional responses. It can also keep a person from recognizing problems with behaviors or relationships.

A person with an addiction can have times of **remission** (when it seems to be under control) and **relapse** (beginning the addiction again). However, if addiction isn't treated, it gets worse over time. Untreated addiction can lead to disability and death.



Addiction is treatable — if you or someone you love has signs of addiction, talk to your doctor.

What are the signs of addiction?

Signs that may signal addiction are listed below:

- **Feeling the need to “cut down”** or feeling guilty about the behavior or substance
- **Other people annoying you** by criticizing the substance or behavior
- **Strong cravings** for the substance or behavior — or needing it to start the day or get through the day
- **A loss of control** over behavior, emotions, or thoughts
- **Continuing the substance or behavior even though it causes negative consequences** — problems with work, activities, relationships, or health

If you think addiction is affecting you or someone you love, it's important to get an evaluation.

How is addiction diagnosed?

There is no blood test or imaging exam for addiction. A doctor will ask questions and compare the answers with specific criteria. Keep in mind:

- **Be honest.** The questions may seem personal, but it's important to answer honestly. Your safety is at stake.
- **Bring a friend or family member if you can.** They might help with the viewpoint of someone who knows you well.
- **Write down your questions for the doctor in advance.** This helps you remember to ask all of your questions.

How is addiction treated?

There are several options for addiction treatment. What's best for you depends on your circumstances, how your addiction affects you, and other factors. You and your doctor will decide the best solution. Your treatment might combine 2 or more of these:

- **An addiction treatment program involving therapy and education.** These programs give you the skills you need to stop the addictive behavior or substance and avoid a relapse (beginning the addiction again). You can participate in a program either as an inpatient (you stay the night until the program is over) or as an outpatient (where you go home every night). Often, treatment programs also include family members for part of the therapy.
- **Counseling with an addiction specialist, psychiatrist, or psychologist.** Counseling helps you gain skills needed for recovery, coping with difficult life situations, and relationships. You can do counseling alone or with a group, and your family members can be involved.
- **Withdrawal medicine.** You might have medicine to ease symptoms that can occur when you stop taking an addictive substance. Sometimes, doctors prescribe relapse-prevention medicines as well.
- **An adult self-help group.** Adult self-help groups often use a 12-step program based on the model used in Alcoholics Anonymous. There are self-help groups for many different addictions. In a self-help group, members gain strength and knowledge from each other. Self-help groups are not as effective in helping adolescent patients with addiction, so they are not recommended.

Who can I contact about treatment?

Intermountain Dayspring:

www.intermountaindayspring.com

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator:

www.samhsa.gov/find-treatment

Alcoholics Anonymous of Utah:

www.utahaa.org



“When I decided to ask for help, I had a lot of fears. I worried it might be embarrassing. I worried I might go through withdrawal. And frankly, I was afraid of living without my addiction.

Recovery is a challenge. But looking back, I can see it's the best decision I've ever made. I'm getting my life back.”

— Jeff, recovering addict

Opioids: Dependence and tolerance

Opioids are prescription pain medicines that affect how your brain processes pain. Examples include codeine, hydrocodone, and oxycodone. Because of the way these medicines affect the body and brain, opioids can cause 2 effects that are different from addiction. These effects are:

- **Dependence**, which means your body has adapted to the medicine. If you suddenly stop taking the medicine, you may have withdrawal symptoms such as cramps, diarrhea, achiness, sweating, or restlessness. To help prevent these, your doctor will have you slowly lower the amount of medicine you take over time until you are done.
- **Tolerance**, which means that the medicine stops working as well over time because your body has adapted to your current dose. If you feel your body is building a tolerance, tell your doctor. You might need a different prescription or another strategy for your treatment plan.

The risk of opioid addiction is low for most people, but it may be higher for people with these risk factors: Addiction in your family history, tobacco use, certain mental health conditions, and trauma or abuse earlier in your life. If you are prescribed opioids for pain, your doctor can assess your risk and take steps to lower your chance of addiction.

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