

Signs of Substance Use



What is a substance use disorder?

Substance use disorder (SUD) is a condition that affects one's brain and behavior. It can lead to the continued use of legal or illegal drugs, or medications, even when that use causes harm.

People with SUD may continue to use substances despite the negative impact on their health, relationships, work, or daily life. The National Institute on Drug Abuse defines drug addiction as “a chronic, relapsing disorder characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use despite adverse consequences.”

What substances are associated with substance use disorder?

Substances frequently include:

- Alcohol
- Marijuana
- Prescription medicines, such as pain pills, stimulants, or anxiety pills
- Methamphetamine (meth)
- Cocaine
- Heroin and other opiates
- Hallucinogens
- Inhalants

Like other medical conditions, addiction can negatively impact the functioning of organs in the body and have harmful long-term side effects. Knowing the warning signs of unhealthy substance use may help you take action early.

Warning signs that a loved one is abusing drugs

People who are struggling with substance use may try to hide it or may not recognize that there is a problem. It is also important to note that unhealthy substance use can show in different ways and not everyone will exhibit all the signs included below. Below are examples of warning signs that may be indicators that a loved one might be struggling with substance use:

Behavioral warning signs

- Drastic changes in mood or behavior
- Social withdrawal
- Changes in groups of friends
- Loss of interest in hobbies
- Problems in relationships
- Decreased attendance and performance at work or school
- Unexplained financial problems, frequent requests for money or stealing
- Engaging in risky, secretive, or suspicious behaviors
- Frequently getting into trouble (fights, accidents, illegal activities)

Physical warning signs

- Red/bloodshot eyes
- Dilated or constricted pupils
- Changes in appetite or sleep patterns (insomnia or oversleeping)
- Unexplained changes in weight
- Neglecting personal hygiene/grooming
- Frequent nosebleeds
- Unusual smells on breath, body, or clothing
- Tremors, slurred speech, or poor coordination

Psychological warning signs

- Rapid mood swings, erratic behavior, or anger outbursts
- Periods of unusual hyperactivity, agitation, or euphoria
- Lack of motivation
- Lethargy (seeming tired or lacking energy)
- Anxiety, paranoia, or excessive fear

If you have concerns about your own substance use or suspect a friend or family member is facing challenges, it is important to seek the help of a licensed counselor or medical professional. Early intervention can help people avoid long-term and harmful consequences of drug use.

Additional resources for education and support include:

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
 - o samhsa.gov
 - o FindTreatment.gov
- SAMHSA's National Helpline
 - o 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)
 - o nida.nih.gov
- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
 - o Call or text 988 if you or someone you know is having thoughts of suicide or emotional distress.

Sources

National Institute on Drug Abuse (Drug Misuse and Addiction) nida.nih.gov
Mayo Clinic (Drug addiction (substance use disorder)) mayoclinic.org

1.888.361.3944

Monday–Friday, 8 a.m.–8 p.m. CT

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