

WHAT IS SUBSTANCE ABUSE? CHEMICAL DEPENDENCE?

Substance abuse is used to describe a pattern of substance or drug use, leading to significant problems or distress. Characteristics of abuse include a failure to carry out obligations at home or work, continual use under circumstances that present a hazard (such as driving a car), legal problems, and feelings of depression, hopelessness and even suicide. Substance abuse, as a disorder, refers to the abuse of illegal substances or the abusive use of legal substances. Alcohol is the most common legal drug of abuse.

Chemical dependency is used to describe continued use of drugs or alcohol, even when no significant problems related to their use have developed. Signs include an increased tolerance or need for increased amounts of substance to attain a desired effect, withdrawal symptoms with decreased use, unsuccessful efforts to decrease use, increased time spent in activities to obtain substances, withdrawal from social and recreational activities, and continued use of a substance despite awareness of the physical or psychological problems associated with its use.

WHAT CAUSES SUBSTANCE ABUSE? CHEMICAL DEPENDENCE?

Substance-related disorders are caused by multiple factors, including genetic vulnerability, environmental stressors, social pressures, individual personality characteristics and psychiatric problems.

WHAT TYPES OF SUBSTANCES ARE MOST COMMONLY ABUSED?

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF ABUSE?

Although many addictive drugs and chemicals are illegal, a significant number of legal substances can also become a dependence problem when continual and increased amounts are consumed. Some of the more commonly abused drugs and chemicals include:

- **Stimulants or “speed”, including prescription amphetamine drugs**
Users may exhibit excessively high energy, inability to sleep, weight loss, rapid pulse, elevated blood pressure, occasional psychotic behavior and dilated (enlarged) pupils.
- **Sedatives or “downers”, including prescription barbiturate drugs commonly referred to as tranquilizers**
Users may appear sleepy and slowed, with slurred speech, small pupils and occasional confusion.
- **Benzodiazepines, including prescription drugs such as valium (for treating anxiety)**
Users may appear sleepy and slowed, with slurred speech, small pupils and occasional confusion.
- **Cocaine-based drugs**
Users may have wide variations in their energy levels, severe mood disturbances, psychosis, paranoia and a constantly runny nose. “Crack” cocaine may cause aggressive or violent behavior.

- **Alcoholic drugs**

Users may have difficulty walking, poor balance, slurring of speech and generally poor coordination. In serious situations, a person's breathing and heart rates will be slowed.

- **Opioids, including illegal drugs (such as heroin) as well as legal prescription drugs, such as pain killers**

Users may appear slowed in their physical movements and speech, may lose weight, and exhibit mood swings and have constricted (small) pupils.

- **Cannabinoid drugs, such as marijuana and hashish**

Users may be sluggish and slow to react, exhibiting mood swings and red eyes with dilated (enlarged) pupils.

Blood testing is a definitive option for determining substance abuse or chemical dependence. It should be viewed as the first of many steps that should be taken in conjunction with a qualified medical provider to diagnose and treat the problem.

*For more information regarding the services provided by the Pathology Center,
call (402) 354-4541 or (888) 432-8980.*

Test Direct is a program of the Methodist Hospital Pathology Center, an accredited member of the College of American Pathologists and the American Association of Blood Banks. The Methodist Hospital Pathology Center is also licensed by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services under CLIA.

The above information is an educational aid for wellness and informational purposes only, and is not a substitute for medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Consult a physician before you stop, start or change any treatment plan, including the use of medications.