What is drug addiction? - Opioid addiction, part 1

Drug addiction is a complex disease. There are many reasons for people to take drugs. Some people take a drug to treat an illness. Other people take drugs to feel good, stop feeling bad, or do well in school or at work. Most people start using drugs voluntarily, meaning they do so by choice.

Drug use becomes **drug abuse** when people use illegal drugs, or use legal drugs inappropriately. A person with addiction seeks and uses drugs in a way that is compulsive, or difficult to control, despite harmful consequences. They repeatedly use drugs to produce pleasure, lower stress, and alter or avoid reality. Drug abuse also happens when someone uses prescription drugs in ways other than prescribed, or uses someone else’s prescription.

**Physical dependence** is not the same thing as addiction to a drug. Physical dependence can happen with the regular use of any substance, legal or illegal, even when taken as prescribed. Physical dependence happens because the body naturally adapts to regular use of a substance.

All drugs of abuse excite the parts of the brain that make you feel good. But, after you take a drug for a while, the feel-good parts of your brain get used to it. Then you need to take more of the drug to get the same good feeling. Soon, your brain and body must have the drug to just feel normal.

A person who is physically dependent on a drug can have **withdrawal symptoms** if they stop taking the drug. They feel sick and awful without the drug.

A **substance use disorder** occurs when a person’s drug use causes health issues or problems at work, school, or home. This drug use may lead to physical dependence and addiction.

**Addiction** occurs when a person cannot control the impulse to use drugs even when there are negative consequences. This is the defining characteristic of addiction.

Brain imaging studies of people with addiction show changes in areas of the brain that control judgment, decision making, learning, memory, and behavior control. Scientists believe that drug addiction is a brain disease because drugs change how the brain works. These changes to the brain can be long-lasting. This may help explain the harmful behaviors of an addicted person.
Addiction is a chronic disease, like heart disease or cancer. A **chronic disease** is a long-term disease that affects people of all ages, both rich and poor, and in every ethnic group. A chronic disease damages the body’s normal, healthy functioning, and causes serious harm to the organs.

**Relapse** occurs when a person returns to drug use after trying to quit. The chronic nature of drug addiction means that relapsing at some point is not only possible, but likely. If left untreated, addiction can last a lifetime. But like other chronic diseases, addiction is treatable.

People and their family members who are dealing with mental or substance use disorders, or both, can call the National Helpline at 1-800-662-4357. This is a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year, information service. It is available in English and Spanish. The National Helpline provides referrals to local treatment centers, support groups, and community-based organizations. Callers can also order free brochures and other information.