**Drug Addiction**

Drug addiction, also called substance use disorder, is a disease that affects a person's brain and behavior and leads to an inability to control the use of a legal or illegal drug or medication. Substances such as alcohol, marijuana and nicotine also are considered drugs. When you're addicted, you may continue using the drug despite the harm it causes.

Drug addiction can start with experimental use of a recreational drug in social situations, and, for some people, the drug use becomes more frequent. For others, particularly with opioids, drug addiction begins with exposure to prescribed medications, or receiving medications from a friend or relative who has been prescribed the medication.

The risk of addiction and how fast you become addicted varies by drug. Some drugs, such as opioid painkillers, have a higher risk and cause addiction more quickly than others.

As time passes, you may need larger doses of the drug to get high. Soon you may need the drug just to feel good. As your drug use increases, you may find that it's increasingly difficult to go without the drug. Attempts to stop drug use may cause intense cravings and make you feel physically ill (withdrawal symptoms).

You may need help from your doctor, family, friends, support groups or an organized treatment program to overcome your drug addiction and stay drug-free.

**Symptoms**

Drug addiction symptoms or behaviors include, among others:

* Feeling that you have to use the drug regularly — daily or even several times a day
* Having intense urges for the drug that block out any other thoughts
* Over time, needing more of the drug to get the same effect
* Taking larger amounts of the drug over a longer period of time than you intended
* Making certain that you maintain a supply of the drug
* Spending money on the drug, even though you can't afford it
* Not meeting obligations and work responsibilities, or cutting back on social or recreational activities because of drug use
* Continuing to use the drug, even though you know it's causing problems in your life or causing you physical or psychological harm
* Doing things to get the drug that you normally wouldn't do, such as stealing
* Driving or doing other risky activities when you're under the influence of the drug
* Spending a good deal of time getting the drug, using the drug or recovering from the effects of the drug
* Failing in your attempts to stop using the drug
* Experiencing withdrawal symptoms when you attempt to stop taking the drug

**Causes of Drug Addiction**

**Causes**

Like many mental health disorders, several factors may contribute to development of drug addiction. The main factors are:

* Environment. Environmental factors, including your family's beliefs and attitudes and exposure to a peer group that encourages drug use, seem to play a role in initial drug use.
* Genetics. Once you've started using a drug, the development into addiction may be influenced by inherited (genetic) traits, which may delay or speed up the disease progression.

**Changes in the brain**

Physical addiction appears to occur when repeated use of a drug changes the way your brain feels pleasure. The addicting drug causes physical changes to some nerve cells (neurons) in your brain. Neurons use chemicals called neurotransmitters to communicate. These changes can remain long after you stop using the drug.

**Risk factors**

People of any age, sex or economic status can become addicted to a drug. Certain factors can affect the likelihood and speed of developing an addiction:

* Family history of addiction. Drug addiction is more common in some families and likely involves genetic predisposition. If you have a blood relative, such as a parent or sibling, with alcohol or drug addiction, you're at greater risk of developing a drug addiction.
* Mental health disorder. If you have a mental health disorder such as depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or post-traumatic stress disorder, you're more likely to become addicted to drugs. Using drugs can become a way of coping with painful feelings, such as anxiety, depression and loneliness, and can make these problems even worse.
* Peer pressure. Peer pressure is a strong factor in starting to use and misuse drugs, particularly for young people.
* Lack of family involvement. Difficult family situations or lack of a bond with your parents or siblings may increase the risk of addiction, as can a lack of parental supervision.
* Early use. Using drugs at an early age can cause changes in the developing brain and increase the likelihood of progressing to drug addiction.
* Taking a highly addictive drug. Some drugs, such as stimulants, cocaine or opioid painkillers, may result in faster development of addiction than other drugs. Smoking or injecting drugs can increase the potential for addiction. Taking drugs considered less addicting — so-called "light drugs" — can start you on a pathway of drug use and addiction.

**Complications**

Drug use can have significant and damaging short-term and long-term effects. Taking some drugs can be particularly risky, especially if you take high doses or combine them with other drugs or alcohol. Here are some examples.

* Methamphetamine, opiates and cocaine are highly addictive and cause multiple short-term and long-term health consequences, including psychotic behavior, seizures or death due to overdose.
* GHB and flunitrazepam may cause sedation, confusion and memory loss. These so-called "date rape drugs" are known to impair the ability to resist unwanted contact and recollection of the event. At high doses, they can cause seizures, coma and death. The danger increases when these drugs are taken with alcohol.
* Ecstasy or molly (MDMA) can cause dehydration, electrolyte imbalance and complications that can include seizures. Long-term, MDMA can damage the brain.
* One particular danger of club drugs is that the liquid, pill or powder forms of these drugs available on the street often contain unknown substances that can be harmful, including other illegally manufactured or pharmaceutical drugs.
* Due to the toxic nature of inhalants, users may develop brain damage of different levels of severity.

**Other life-changing complications**

Dependence on drugs can create a number of dangerous and damaging complications, including:

* Getting a communicable disease. People who are addicted to a drug are more likely to get an infectious disease, such as HIV, either through unsafe sex or by sharing needles.
* Other health problems. Drug addiction can lead to a range of both short-term and long-term mental and physical health problems. These depend on what drug is taken.
* Accidents. People who are addicted to drugs are more likely to drive or do other dangerous activities while under the influence.
* Suicide. People who are addicted to drugs die by suicide more often than people who aren't addicted.
* Family problems. Behavioral changes may cause marital or family conflict and custody issues.
* Work issues. Drug use can cause declining performance at work, absenteeism and eventual loss of employment.
* Problems at school. Drug use can negatively affect academic performance and motivation to excel in school.
* Legal issues. Legal problems are common for drug users and can stem from buying or possessing illegal drugs, stealing to support the drug addiction, driving while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or disputes over child custody.
* Financial problems. Spending money to support drug use takes away money from other needs, could lead to debt, and can lead to illegal or unethical behaviors.

**Prevention**

The best way to prevent an addiction to a drug is not to take the drug at all. If your doctor prescribes a drug with the potential for addiction, use care when taking the drug and follow the instructions provided by your doctor.

Doctors should prescribe these medications at safe doses and amounts and monitor their use so that you're not given too great a dose or for too long a time. If you feel you need to take more than the prescribed dose of a medication, talk to your doctor.

**Preventing drug misuse in children and teenagers**

Take these steps to help prevent drug misuse in your children and teenagers:

* Communicate. Talk to your children about the risks of drug use and misuse.
* Listen. Be a good listener when your children talk about peer pressure, and be supportive of their efforts to resist it.
* Set a good example. Don't misuse alcohol or addictive drugs. Children of parents who misuse drugs are at greater risk of drug addiction.
* Strengthen the bond. Work on your relationship with your children. A strong, stable bond between you and your child will reduce your child's risk of using or misusing drugs.

**Preventing a relapse**

Once you've been addicted to a drug, you're at high risk of falling back into a pattern of addiction. If you do start using the drug, it's likely you'll lose control over its use again — even if you've had treatment and you haven't used the drug for some time.

* Stick with your treatment plan. Monitor your cravings. It may seem like you've recovered and you don't need to keep taking steps to stay drug-free. But your chances of staying drug-free will be much higher if you continue seeing your therapist or counselor, going to support group meetings and taking prescribed medication.
* Avoid high-risk situations. Don't go back to the neighborhood where you used to get your drugs. And stay away from your old drug crowd.
* Get help immediately if you use the drug again. If you start using the drug again, talk to your doctor, your mental health professional or someone else who can help you right away.

**Drug Addiction in Pakistan**

Drug addiction is defined as compulsive and out-of-control drug use, despite negative consequences. In the last few decades, drug addiction has increased exponentially in Pakistan. Most of the illegal drugs come from the neighboring Afghanistan. According to the UN estimate, 8.9 million people in the country are drug users. Cannabis is the most used drug. The rate of injection drug abuse has also increased significantly in Pakistan, sparking fears of an HIV epidemic.

Although, the increase in the problem has been alarming, the government response has been minimal at best. Few programs are active in the country to help drug addicts and smuggling and availability of the drugs in the country has gone almost unchecked.

Anti-Narcotics Force is the government agency responsible for tackling drug smuggling and use within Pakistan.

In the past few years, statistics have shown a massive drug addiction rise in Pakistan. According to a 2013 report by the UN, around 6.7 million people in Pakistan are drug addicts. We see hardly any preventive measures, despite the shocking numbers. Let us take a look at some of the trending factors that lead to drug addiction in Pakistan.

**Common Drugs in Pakistan**

Cannabis is one of the most commonly used and sold drugs in Pakistan. Around 4 million people are cannabis users, which makes it a vast majority. The overuse and abuse of cannabis can have adverse affects on one’s mental and physical capabilities. Furthermore, it tends to cloud one’s judgement, making them lose any ambition or will power. On the other hand, heroin and opium are used by the remaining few, with 860,000 chronic heroin users. Both these opiates cause short-term euphoric feelings, along with pain relief, relaxation and drowsiness. Side effects such as grogginess, slower heart rate, and headaches are fairly common with both. However, prolonged use may result in organ disorders, mental health issues and various cancers of the brain and body. “Pakistan’s illegal drug trade is believed to generate $2 billion a year [making] Pakistan the most heroin-addicted country, per capita, in the world,” writes David Browne in The Telegraph.

**Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – the Addicts Haven**

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is considered to home the highest number of drug users in Pakistan. About 11 percent of the entire KPK population use drugs. Various geographical, social and political factors are at play here, converting a once tourist hub into a drug possessed region. Firstly, it shares the border with Afghan provinces that have extensive opium-poppy fields. Secondly, the adjoining Khyber tribal areas are full of heroin-processing labs.

Furthermore, due to the taliban influence and mujahideen insurgency across the Afghanistan Pakistan border, the city is steeped in lawlessness and corruption. Narcotics and drugs are just one of the many things on the long list of crimes that are easily neglected by the government. According to David Browne, “Pakistan aims to be drug-free by 2020 under its 2010-2014 Drug Abuse Control Master Plan. Yet in 2011 and 2012 the body set up to coordinate this goal did not even bother to meet.”

**Religious Factors**

Because alcohol is not allowed in Islam, many addicts find ways of justifying drugs, believing that it is a religiously and socially acceptable act. As a matter of fact, Islam forbids not just alcohol, but also intoxicants, which go side by side with gambling. “Satan only wants to cause between you animosity and hatred through intoxicants and gambling and to avert you from the remembrance of Allah and from prayer. So will you not desist?” [Quran: 5:91]. However, because the destruction that comes about when a poor man or woman use up their daily savings on drugs does not cause any major destruction other than to themselves, it is deemed a less important issue to worry about than others.

**Peer Pressure**

Moving away from the poverty stricken lower class to the privileged upper class, drug addiction is prevalent in spades even here. One cannot tell whether it is surprising or not that college and university student’s use freely and openly every day. But the peer pressure is not just friends copying friends. In fact, the security guards, janitorial staff, and even faculty members use drugs, inside and outside school premises. Instead of disciplining students, they become allies with them in the act. Drug usage has become such a second nature to so many folks in Pakistan, that even an educational institution does not see it as a weakness in the individual, in the institution or in the system.

**Efforts in the Private and Public Sectors**

According to a satirical comment by David Browne on the government’s efforts involving drugs, ” Pakistan aims to be drug-free by 2020 under its 2010-2014 Drug Abuse Control Master Plan. Yet in 2011 and 2012 the body set up to coordinate this goal did not even bother to meet.” However, he goes on to mention the Dost Welfare Foundation. This is a charity based organization, founded and established in 1922 by Dr. Parveen Azam Khan. It is funded by UNODC, the Canadian International Development and Britain’s Department for International Development. It is one of the few rehabilitation centers that has seen more success stories than most other organizations. Furthermore, the techniques it uses for therapy are humane and ethically sound, which is another challenge in itself for Pakistan. Therefore, the message of hope is strong and positive.

All in all, the drug epidemic is a real and major problem that we need to overcome. The hope to end it lies in taking it seriously and dealing with it in a proper manner.