

[Substance Abuse and Addiction](#) [1]

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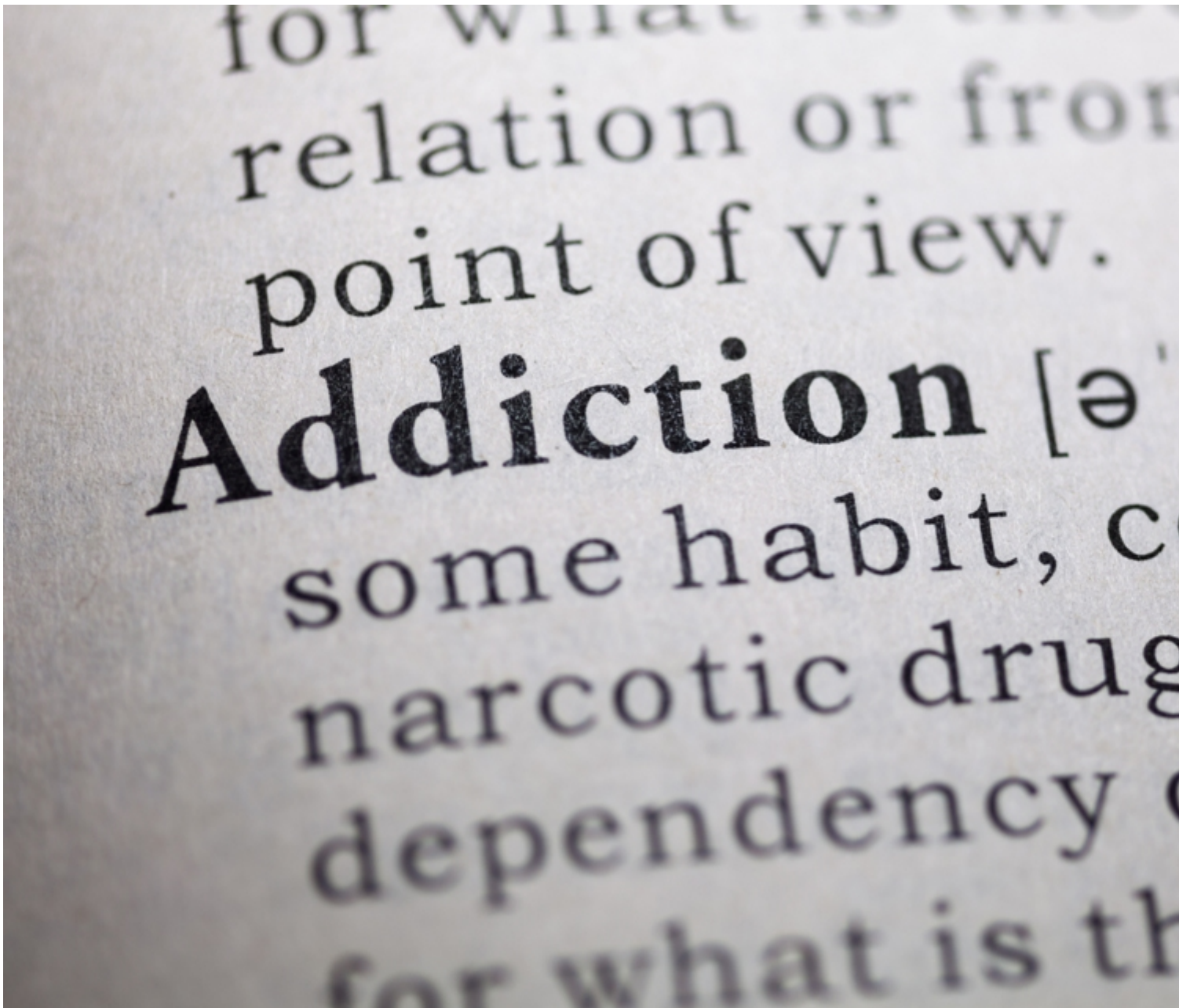


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Substance abuse and addiction cause serious health-related problems for many people, including those living with HIV (HIV+). The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that the harmful use of alcohol results in over three million deaths each year around the world. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that, of the 246 million drug users worldwide, some 27 million had problems with drug use in 2013. One in every three of these drug users is a woman. People who [inject drugs](#) [2] account for almost half of all problem drug users. Currently, there are about 13 million injection drug users (IDUs), almost two million of whom are living with HIV.

The US National Institute on Drug Abuse reported that in 2013, around seven percent of Americans ? almost 17 million people ? were abusing or addicted to alcohol. Among American girls and women, approximately four million abuse illegal drugs; almost as many abuse prescription drugs.

Unfortunately, opioid use among American [pregnant women](#) [3] has increased substantially over the past several years. Babies born to women who use opioids can experience a drug withdrawal syndrome called neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS). Babies with NAS often have digestive problems, tremors, seizures, trouble sleeping, and difficulty with temperature control. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the number of babies born with NAS tripled from 1999 to 2013.

It is important to understand what substance abuse and addiction are, if they affect you, and what you can do to get help if you need it.

What Do These Terms Mean?

It can be helpful to know what people mean when they talk about substance use, substance abuse, dependence, and addiction.

Substance: When used with the words use or abuse, 'substance' generally refers to things like prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs, street drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. What these substances have in common is that they change how people feel ? physically and/or emotionally ? when they take them.

Substance use: To use a substance simply means to put that substance in your body in some way (e.g., to swallow, eat, drink, smoke, snort, inject the substance). Some common examples of substance use include: drinking alcohol, snorting a line of cocaine, taking a prescription anti-anxiety pill, smoking a cigarette, or injecting (shooting) some heroin.

Substance abuse: This term is used to describe a pattern of substance use that involves serious problems or negative consequences in the user's life. These problems include, but are not limited to: not going to work or school, legal troubles, struggles in relationships with family or friends, and substance use in dangerous situations (e.g., while driving a car).

Dependence: This word is used most often to describe what happens when the body gets used to a particular substance. Sometimes the body 'learns' to tolerate a substance, so that more of the substance is needed to get the same effect. This is called physical dependence and also means that suddenly stopping the use of the substance will likely cause withdrawal symptoms. If a substance is used to get relief from emotional discomfort, emotional dependence may also develop. Often, substances that cause physical dependence are

referred to as addicting.

Addiction: This word is used to refer to substance abuse that involves loss of control (compulsive use), continued use despite harmful consequences, and denial (refusal to acknowledge the problem). Addiction is now understood as a chronic (long-lasting) disease of the brain's reward and motivation system. Continued use of substances that alter how we feel can change our brain's chemistry and electrical wiring. In other words, addiction does NOT occur only because someone does not have enough willpower.

As with any disease, vulnerability to the disease of addiction differs from person to person. There are several factors that can put you at risk for abusing or becoming addicted to alcohol and drugs:

- Substance abuse or addiction in the family
- Early age of first use of drugs or alcohol
- [Trauma](#) [4], abuse, [violence](#) [5], or neglect in childhood
- Emotional problems like anxiety and [depression](#) [6]

Substance Use and HIV

So how is the use of things like alcohol, street drugs, and prescription medications related to HIV? First, substance use increases the [spread of HIV](#) [7] infection in the following ways. For many people, drinking and using drugs go together with sex. When people are under the influence of drugs or alcohol, they are more likely to make bad decisions and have [unsafe sex](#) [8]. People who use drugs are also more likely to exchange sex, including unprotected sex, for drugs or money to buy drugs.

Substance use also causes problems for people living with HIV. When you are under the influence of drugs or alcohol, you are more likely to miss doses of your HIV drugs and less likely to take your HIV drugs as they are prescribed (this is called [adherence](#) [9]). As a result, your body may not receive the medications it needs to keep your immune system healthy and to prevent drug [resistance](#) [10].

Your liver's job is to break down drugs and toxins that enter the body. If you take HIV drugs ? especially protease inhibitors (PIs) and non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NNRTIs) ? while also using street drugs or alcohol, your HIV drugs are 'competing' for your liver's attention with the other substance. As a result, both your HIV drugs and whatever substance you have taken may take longer to break down. This means you may have higher than expected levels of either or both of them in your bloodstream. Having too much HIV drug in your system can cause serious, even life-threatening [side effects](#) [11]. In the same way, an overdose of recreational drugs, prescription drugs, or alcohol can be fatal.

Lastly, substance abuse plays a major role in [domestic violence](#) [5]. Because violence is linked to poor decision-making and more risk taking, women who experience violence are more likely to suffer bad health effects. These effects include a higher risk for getting HIV as well as poor adherence to HIV drugs.

How to Know if You Have a Problem with Substance Use

Millions of people use substances in a controlled and safe manner. However, many people have a hard time knowing when their substance use becomes problematic or harmful. Here are some questions to help you figure out if you are abusing alcohol, street drugs, or prescription drugs:

- Have you ever felt you needed to cut down on your drinking or substance use?
- Have you lost control over when, how long, or how much you drink or use?
- Do you drink or use more to get the same effect as before?
- Do you use or drink more often to cope or 'escape'?
- Do you need to drink or use regularly to feel socially capable, self-confident, or less shy?
- Do you hide your drinking or substance use, or behave secretly around it?

- Have others annoyed you by questioning or criticizing your substance use?
- Do you spend increasing amounts of money on your substance?
- Does your substance use cause problems with life activities (e.g., dropping grades in school, missing work or poor job performance, trouble in relationships with friends or family)?

Answering yes to just one of these questions can indicate that you may have a substance use problem. Substance abuse and addiction are less about how much or how often a substance is used and more about whether substance use causes problems in your life. If drinking or using drugs is causing problems for you, it is important for you to get help.

What You Can Do

For many people struggling with substance abuse or addiction, recognizing you have a problem is the first step toward health and recovery. It is a step that can take enormous courage and strength. So can the next step: deciding to make a change. The good news is that with support and treatment, change is possible.

There are many treatment options for drug and alcohol addiction, and no one option is best for all people. For some, self-directed treatment and self-help groups are best. For others, therapy or rehab may be necessary. For many people, medications such as [buprenorphine \(Suboxone, Subutex\) and methadone](#) [12], which can help ease withdrawal symptoms and block cravings, are an important part of treatment.

Which treatment is right for you depends on several factors and needs to match your special needs and situation. It is also important to seek help for any other emotional or physical issues when you get treatment for your addiction.

Regardless of the treatment option you choose, it is very important that you get [support](#) [13]. Recovery can be a long and difficult road with many setbacks and challenges. You will be more likely to succeed if you have others to lean on, encourage you, guide you, and remind you of the commitment you are making to change your life for the better. Support can come from friends and family, people in your spiritual community, health care providers, other recovering substance abusers/addicts, and therapists or counselors.

For help finding support and treatment you can contact:

- [Narcotics Anonymous](#) [14] website for those who use drugs; they provide services worldwide, including websites, helplines, and in-person meeting locations
- Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) website for those who struggle with alcohol; click [here](#) [15] to find A.A. resources near you worldwide
- SAMSHA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration): 1-800-662-HELP [1-800-662-9832 (Español)] to reach a free hotline or go to their [facility locator](#) [16] website

Tags:

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Additional Resources

Select the links below for additional materials related to substance abuse and addiction.

[Drug & Alcohol Abuse Help Center](#) [28]

[Recreational Drugs and HIV \(CATIE\)](#) [29]

[Interactions Between HIV Treatment and Recreational Drugs \(AIDSmap\)](#) [30]

[US Babies Born Addicted to Opioids Has Tripled in 15 Years, CDC Says \(STAT\)](#) [31]

[Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome \(Stanford Children's Health\)](#) [32]

[Overcoming Drug Addiction \(Helpguide\)](#) [33]

[American Society of Addiction Medicine: Resources](#) [34]

[Drugs, Brains, and Behavior: The Science of Addiction \(NIH\)](#) [35]

[Rethinking Drinking: Alcohol and Your Health \(NIH\)](#) [36]

[Sharing Needles to Inject Drugs and HIV \(AVERT\)](#) [37]

[Substance Abuse/Use \(AIDS.gov\)](#) [38]

[Do You Have a Drug Abuse Problem? \(Helpguide\)](#) [39]

[Principles of Drug Addiction Treatment: FAQs \(NIH\)](#) [40]

[Am I Drug Addicted? \(quiz from NCADD\)](#) [41]

[Women, Drugs, and HIV in Ukraine \(YouTube\)](#) [42]

[Syringe Exchange Programs \(AIDS United\)](#) [43]

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- [A Girl Like Me](#)
- [Partners](#)
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Links:

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[2] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/cleaning-equipment-injecting-drugs>

[3] <http://www.thewellproject.org/search/content/pregnant%20women>

[4] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/trauma-and-hiv>

[5] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/violence-against-women-and-hiv>

[6] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/depression-women-and-hiv>

[7] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/hiv-transmission>

[8] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/safer-sex>

[9] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/adherence-0>

- [10] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/resistance>
- [11] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/side-effects>
- [12] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/treatment-opioid-addiction>
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- [16] <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>
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- [31] <https://www.statnews.com/2016/08/11/babies-opioids-addiction/>
- [32] <http://www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=neonatal-abstinence-syndrome-90-P02387>
- [33] <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/addiction/overcoming-drug-addiction.htm>
- [34] <http://www.asam.org/for-the-public>
- [35] <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/science-addiction/drug-abuse-addiction>
- [36] <http://rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov/>
- [37] <http://www.avert.org/injecting.htm>
- [38] <http://aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/prevention/reduce-your-risk/substance-abuse-use/>
- [39] <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/addiction/drug-abuse-and-addiction.htm>
- [40] <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/principles-drug-addiction-treatment/frequently-asked-questions>
- [41] <https://ncadd.org/learn-about-drugs/drug-abuse-self-test>
- [42] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z79QGaEqsDM>
- [43] http://www.aidsunited.org/data/files/Site_18/AW2015-SyringeExchange_Web.pdf