Alcohol and drugs - dependence and addiction

Summary

- Anyone can be affected by alcohol or other drug dependence.
- However, it can be difficult to recognise the signs of dependence.
- Becoming dependent on alcohol or other drugs means you rely on a substance to feel good or normal, or to cope with everyday life.
- If you continue to use alcohol or other drugs despite knowing the harmful consequences, you could have developed a dependence.
- If you think that you or someone close to you may have a drug or alcohol problem, speak with your local doctor or phone DirectLine on 1800 888 236. It’s free, anonymous, and available 24 hours.

It is often difficult for people to recognise that they have become dependent on alcohol or other drugs. They may see it as a temporary situation because they are in physical pain or because they are dealing with a difficult situation such as grief, loss, anxiety or trauma.

Asking for help when you first suspect you have a problem is important so that you can get support to make changes. The earlier you reach out the better – but it’s never too late.

If you think you are dependent on alcohol or other drugs, speak to your local doctor or call DirectLine on 1800 888 236 as soon as possible.

Signs of alcohol or other drug dependence

Some signs that you may have an alcohol or other drug problem are:

- changed eating or sleeping habits
- caring less about your appearance
- spending more time with people who drink or use drugs to excess
- missing appointments, classes or work commitments
- losing interest in activities that you used to love
- getting in trouble in school, at work or with the law
- getting into more arguments with family and friends
- friends or family asking you if you have a substance abuse problem
- relying on drugs or alcohol to have fun or relax
- having blackouts
- drinking or using drugs when you are alone
- keeping secrets from friends or family
- finding you need more and more of the substance to get the same feeling.

Often it is family and friends who first recognise that a person they care about has an alcohol or drug problem. They may have noticed them acting differently – being withdrawn, always tired, increasingly hostile or easily upset. They may ask the person straight out if they have a problem.

If that happens to you, you might feel threatened or criticised. Try to remember that they’re trying to look out for your wellbeing. A positive first step would be to listen, reflect, and be honest with yourself about what they had to say.

Recognising an alcohol and drug problem
There is no particular type of person who becomes dependent on alcohol or other drugs. It can happen to anyone.

What starts as occasional use of a drug or one prescription of pain-relieving medication, for example, can get out of control as time passes – especially in times of pain or stress. You may find you need bigger doses to get the same feeling or to lessen the pain. Eventually, you may depend on the drug to feel good or to get through your day.

Other signs that you are becoming dependent on alcohol or other drugs include:

- having intense urges for the substance – this could be once a day or several times a day
- needing more of a substance to get the same effect
- fixating about making sure you have a constant supply of the substance
- spending money on the substance, even when you cannot afford it
- cutting back on social or other activities
- not meeting your work, family or study responsibilities
- lying to people about your alcohol or drug use when they ask
- doing things that are illegal so you can get the substance, such as stealing
- taking risks such as driving when you are under the influence of the substance
- trying but failing to stop using the substance
- experiencing withdrawal symptoms when you try to stop taking the substance.

Reducing or stopping use of alcohol or other drugs

Cutting down on alcohol or other drugs is hard to do because repeated alcohol or drug use makes the body more dependent and changes the brain. Brain scans of people who are dependent on alcohol or other drugs often show changes in the areas of the brain that help you learn and remember and make decisions.

The best thing you can do is to talk to someone you trust so you do not have to deal with this challenge alone.

Getting help for alcohol or other drug dependence

If you think that you or someone close to you has an alcohol or other drug problem, speak first with your local doctor or call DirectLine, on 1800 888 236.

DirectLine is a 24-hour-a-day information and advice line that is free, anonymous and confidential. You can talk to a professional counsellor who is experienced in alcohol and drug-related matters, and they can start you on the right track.

Where to get help

- Your GP (doctor)
- DirectLine, call 1800 888 236
- Youth Drug and Alcohol Advice (YoDAA) line, call 1800 458 685.