

Recovery From Drug Addiction

Science helps us understand the challenges of drug addiction and staying off drugs.



Drug addiction is a brain disease because drugs change how the brain works. People who are addicted to drugs can't stop using them, even when they really want to. Their priorities change and getting drugs can become more important than their loved ones, responsibilities, and life goals. Drug addiction can be treated, but recovery can take time—sometimes a long time. Like other chronic diseases such as heart disease, drug addiction often requires treatment throughout a person's life. Even after a period of time without using drugs, an addicted person may have a relapse, meaning they start to use again. Relapse requires more or different treatment in order for him or her to stop using drugs again.

Why Do Some People Become Addicted While Others Do Not?

A person's risk for drug addiction is affected by several factors:

- **Genetics**—some genes make people more prone to becoming addicted;
- **Family and social environment**—negative influences can include peer pressure; physical or sexual abuse; stress; poor relationships with parents or friends; and availability of drugs;
- **Mental health**—mental illness could place some people at a greater risk for addiction;
- **Age**—the younger a person is when drug use begins, the greater the chance for addiction.

One thing is certain: Drug addiction can never develop in people who never use drugs.

Recovering From Addiction

In 2012, 23 million people in the United States needed treatment for alcohol/drug use.¹ Of those 23 million people, however, only 4 million actually got treatment, making recovery even more challenging. Most people who succeed in treatment commit to a lifelong process of recovery: getting more treatment when needed; living a healthy lifestyle; and relying on family, friends, and others in recovery for support.

▶ **More Info:** For additional facts about the brain and drugs, visit scholastic.com/headsup and teens.drugabuse.gov.

Why Does Relapse Happen?

Relapse happens because drugs change the wiring in a person's brain. Once addicted, a person is at high risk of using drugs when "triggered." Like patients with other chronic diseases such as asthma and diabetes, patients with drug addiction must learn to carefully manage their condition to avoid relapses.

What Are "Triggers"?

Triggers can be situations (including stress), people, smells, and even songs that remind someone of using drugs. These cause the brain to release the chemical dopamine—which signals pleasure—and creates intense drug cravings. Triggers differ for each person and are often subconscious—meaning that the person isn't aware of what is happening. Treatment helps people learn how to handle their triggers without using drugs.

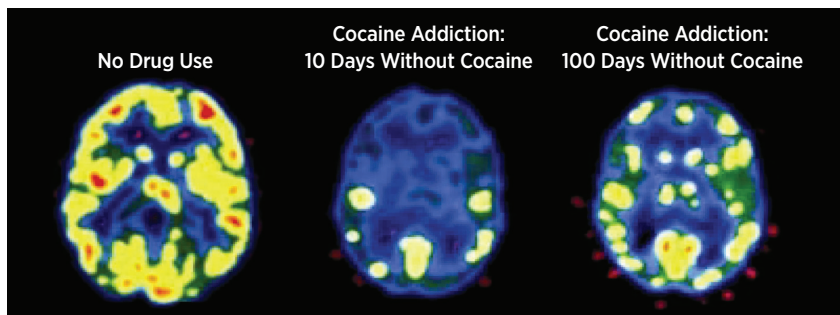
Challenges of Recovery

Recovery from drug addiction means overcoming obstacles:

1. Finding and paying for the right treatment—for as long as it is needed.
2. Maintaining permanent lifestyle changes to avoid drug use. A strong support system of family, friends, and/or others in recovery can help.
3. Avoiding triggers by staying away from drug users or parties with drugs, or other situations that might lead to drug cravings.

Addiction is a long-term condition and avoiding relapse is an ongoing challenge, even after many years in recovery. The sooner treatment is started, or restarted after relapse, the faster someone can get healthy.

How the Brain Changes and Recovers From Drug Use



The images² above show that once addicted to drugs, the brain can be affected for a long time, although recovery is possible.

- The first image shows a normal-functioning brain without drugs. A lot of yellow means lots of brain activity.
- The next two images show the brain of someone addicted to cocaine, but who has not used in 10 days and again in 100 days. The amount of brain activity (yellow) increases over time.

How much a brain recovers after addiction depends on the drug, how long it was used, how long without use, and the person's genes.

Recovery: Getting the Right Support

A successful treatment plan for drug addiction puts different types of support together in a way that works for each person's particular situation. When relapse happens, it's time to step back and adjust the plan, which can be constructed from many different types of support, including:



To Get Help for Drug Problems:

teens.drugabuse.gov/drug-problem-help