UNDERSTANDING ADDICTION

Many people don't understand why or how other people become addicted to drugs. They may mistakenly think that people who use drugs lack moral principles or willpower and that they could stop their drug use simply by choice. In reality, drug addiction is a complex disease, and quitting usually takes more than good intentions or a strong will.

Oklahoma State Department of Health

What is drug addiction?

Addiction* is defined as a chronic, relapsing brain disease that is characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences.

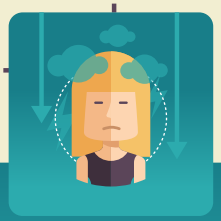
It is considered a brain disease because drugs change the brain – they change its structure and how it works. These brain changes can be long lasting and can lead to the harmful behaviors seen in people who abuse drugs. Addiction is a lot like other diseases, such as heart disease. Both disrupt the normal, healthy functioning of the underlying organ, can have serious harmful consequences, and are preventable and treatable, but if left untreated, can last a lifetime.

Is continued drug abuse a voluntary behavior?

The initial decision to take drugs is typically voluntary. However, with continued use, a person's ability to exert self-control can become seriously impaired; this impairment in self-control is the hallmark of addiction. Brain imaging studies of people with addiction show physical changes in areas of the brain that are critical to judgment, decision making, learning and memory, and behavior control. Scientists believe that these changes alter the way the brain works and may help explain the compulsive and destructive behaviors of addiction.

Why do people take drugs?

To feel good.



To feel better.

To do better.

Curiosity and "because others are doing it."

*The term *addiction* as used in this fact sheet may be regarded as equivalent to a *severe substance use disorder* as defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5, 2013).

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Drugs change the brain in ways that make quitting hard, even for those who want to quit. Fortunately, researchers know more than ever about how drugs affect the brain and have found treatments that can help people recover from drug addiction and lead productive lives.

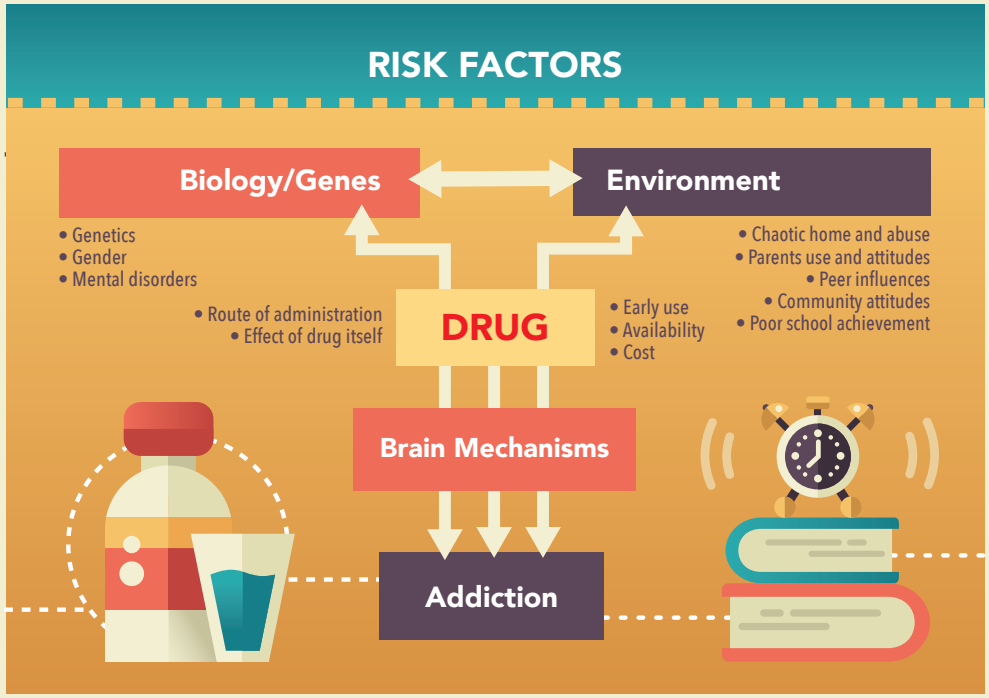
Why do some people become addicted to drugs, while others do not?

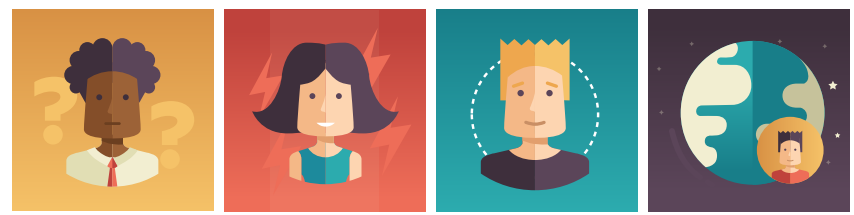
As with any other disease, vulnerability to addiction differs from person to person, and no single factor determines whether a person will become addicted to drugs. In general, the more **risk factors** a person has, the greater the chance that taking drugs will lead to abuse and addiction. **Protective factors**, on the other hand, reduce a person's risk of developing addiction. Risk and protective factors may be either environmental (such as conditions at home, at school, and in the neighborhood) or biological (for instance, a person's genes, their stage of development, and even their gender or ethnicity).

Source: National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014

Recovery is Possible.

Addiction is recognized as a treatable disease, requiring continuing care and multifaceted approaches – similar to other chronic conditions like diabetes or cardiovascular disease. And like other diseases, treatment for drug abuse and addiction not only saves lives, but is cost effective. Treatment includes the use of medication-assisted treatment (MAT), which is the use of medications, in combination with counseling and behavioral therapies, for the treatment of substance use disorders. Research shows that, when treating addiction, a combination of medication and behavioral therapies is most successful. For more information on MAT, visit https://www.samhsa.gov/medication-assisted-treatment.





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