

What is a Substance Use Disorder?

Substance use disorder (SUD) is a term to describe the disease of addiction. It is a chronic, relapsing brain disease that is characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences. SUD disrupts regions of the brain that are responsible for reward, motivation, learning, judgment and memory.

It is not a moral failing, a choice, or a character flaw.

Why is it important to understand?

Addiction is a lot like other diseases, such as heart disease. Both disrupt the normal, healthy functioning of an organ in the body, both have serious harmful effects, and both are, in many cases, preventable and treatable. If left untreated, they can last a lifetime and may lead to death.

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

As with any other disease, vulnerability to develop an addiction differs from person to person, and no single factor determines whether a person will develop a substance use disorder. In general, the more risk factors a person has, the greater the chance of developing SUD.

While you might choose to drink alcohol, try drugs, or gamble, you don't choose to become addicted.

Substance Use Disorder Risk Factors



Biology

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, up to half of your risk of addiction to alcohol, nicotine, or other drugs is based on genetics. *If you have family members who've experienced substance use disorder, you are at a higher risk.*



Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Experiencing or witnessing violence, abuse, or neglect as a child. Growing up in a household affected by substance use, mental health issues, parental separation or incarceration.



Environmental Factors

Early exposure and easy access to substances at school, home, or in the community. Having family and/or friends who use substances.



Early Use

When drug use starts at a young age brain development is impacted, making the individual more prone to develop a SUD and other mental health disorders.



Mental Health Concerns

Underlying mental health disorders can increase the risk of developing a SUD. In turn, an addiction can increase the severity of other mental health conditions.



Other medical conditions may also increase your risk. Taking prescription pain medication after a surgery may lead to a SUD. A change in lifestyle, due to injury or illness can also lead to a SUD, as a coping mechanism.

Prevention

For every risk factor, there is a protective factor to counter-balance it. Prevention focuses on strengthening the protective factors that we can control to decrease the likelihood that a person or community will struggle with addiction.

If you have risk factors for addiction, talk to your doctor. They can help you learn more about addiction, your risk of developing it, and strategies to avoid it.

If you suspect you have an addiction, ask your doctor for help. They may recommend counseling, medications, or other treatment options.

Substance use disorder (SUD) is a treatable chronic health condition from which people can and do recover.

To learn more about stigma and take the SMC Goes Purple pledge, visit www.smchd.org/gopurple.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

www.drugabuse.gov/sites/default/files/nidamed_words_matter_terms.pdf
www.shatterproof.org/
www.cdc.gov/stopoverdose/stigma/index.html
opioidlibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/NCBH_MAT_MythsVFacts.pdf

