

Alcohol and Drugs

What If I'm Concerned About Someone Else's Drinking?

Sometimes people live in homes where a parent or other family member drinks too much. This may make you angry, scared, and depressed. Many people can't control their drinking without help. This doesn't mean that they love or care about you any less.

Alcoholism is an illness that needs to be treated just like other illnesses.

People with drinking problems can't stop drinking until they are ready to admit they have a problem and get help. This can leave family members and loved ones feeling helpless. The good news is there are many places to turn for help: a supportive adult, such as your guidance counselor, or a relative or older sibling will understand what you're going through. Also, professional organizations like Alateen can help.

If you have a friend whose drinking concerns you, make sure he or she stays safe.

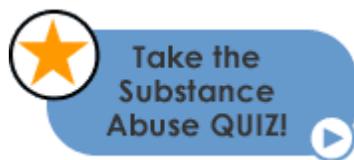
Don't let your friend drink and drive, for example. If you can, try to keep friends who have been drinking from doing anything dangerous, such as trying to walk home at night alone or starting a fight. And protect yourself, too. Don't get in a car with someone who's been drinking, even if that person is your ride home. Ask a sober adult to drive you instead or call a cab.

Everyone makes decisions about whether to drink and how much — even adults. It's possible to enjoy a party or other event just as much, if not more so, when you don't

drink. And with your central nervous system working as it's supposed to, you'll remember more about the great time you had!

Jason's life is beginning to unravel. His grades have slipped, he's moody, he doesn't talk to his friends, and he has stopped showing up for practice. Jason's friends know he has been experimenting with drugs and now they're worried he has become addicted.

Defining an addiction is tricky, and knowing how to handle one is even harder.



What Are Substance Abuse and Addiction?

The difference between substance abuse and addiction is very slight. Substance abuse means using an illegal substance or using a legal substance in the wrong way.

Addiction begins as abuse, or using a substance like marijuana or cocaine. You can abuse a [drug](#) (or [alcohol](#)) without having an addiction. For example, just because Sara smoked weed a few times doesn't mean that she has an addiction, but it does mean that she's abusing a drug — and that could lead to an addiction.

People can get addicted to all sorts of substances. When we think of addiction, we usually think of alcohol or illegal drugs. But people become addicted to medications,

cigarettes, even glue! And some substances are more addictive than others: Drugs like crack or heroin are so addictive that they might only be used once or twice before the user loses control.

Addiction means a person has no control over whether he or she uses a drug or drinks. Someone who's addicted to cocaine has grown so used to the drug that he or she *has* to have it. Addiction can be physical, psychological, or both.

Physical Addiction

Being physically addicted means a person's body actually becomes dependent on a particular substance (even smoking is physically addictive). It also means building **tolerance** to that substance, so that a person needs a larger dose than ever before to get the same effects. Someone who is physically addicted and stops using a substance like drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes may experience **withdrawal** symptoms. Common symptoms of withdrawal are diarrhea, shaking, and generally feeling awful.

Psychological Addiction

Psychological addiction happens when the cravings for a drug are psychological or emotional. People who are psychologically addicted feel overcome by the **desire** to have a drug. They may lie or steal to get it.

A person crosses the line between abuse and addiction when he or she is no longer trying the drug to have fun or get high, but has come to depend on it. His or her whole

life centers around the need for the drug. An addicted person — whether it's a physical or psychological addiction or both — no longer feels like there is a choice in taking a substance.

Signs of Addiction

The most obvious sign of an addiction is the need to have a particular drug or substance. However, many other signs can suggest a possible addiction, such as changes in mood or weight loss or gain. (These also are signs of other conditions, too, though, such as [depression](#) or [eating disorders](#).)

Signs that you or someone you know may have a drug or alcohol addiction include:

Psychological signals:

- use of drugs or alcohol as a way to forget problems or to relax
- withdrawal or keeping secrets from family and friends
- loss of interest in activities that used to be important
- problems with schoolwork, such as slipping grades or absences
- changes in friendships, such as hanging out only with friends who use drugs
- spending a lot of time figuring out how to get drugs
- stealing or selling belongings to be able to afford drugs
- failed attempts to stop taking drugs or drinking
- anxiety, anger, or depression
- mood swings

Physical signals:

- changes in sleeping habits
- feeling shaky or sick when trying to stop
- needing to take more of the substance to get the same effect
- changes in eating habits, including weight loss or gain

Getting Help

If you think you're addicted to drugs or alcohol, recognizing that you have a problem is the first step in getting help.

A lot of people think they can kick the problem on their own, but that doesn't work for most people. Find someone you trust to talk to. It may help to talk to a friend or someone your own age at first, but a supportive and understanding adult is your best option for getting help. If you can't talk to your parents, you might want to approach a school counselor, relative, doctor, favorite teacher, or religious leader.

Unfortunately, overcoming addiction is not easy. Quitting drugs or drinking is probably going to be one of the hardest things you've ever done. It's not a sign of weakness if you need professional help from a trained drug counselor or therapist. Most people who try to kick a drug or alcohol problem need professional assistance or a treatment program to do so.

www.kidshealth.org