

# What Is Addiction? What Causes Addiction?

People with an addiction do not have control over what they are doing, taking or using. Their addiction may reach a point at which it is harmful. Addictions do not only include physical things we consume, such as drugs or alcohol, but may include virtually anything, such abstract things as gambling to seemingly harmless products, such as chocolate - in other words, addiction may refer to a *substance dependence* (e.g. drug addiction) or *behavioral addiction* (e.g. gambling addiction).

This article focuses mainly on addiction to physical substances.

In the past addiction used to refer just to psychoactive substances that cross the blood-brain barrier, temporarily altering the chemical balance of the brain; this would include alcohol, tobacco and some drugs. A considerable number of psychologists, other health care professionals and lay people now insist that psychological dependency, as may be the case with gambling, sex, internet, work, exercise, etc. should also be counted as addictions, because they can also lead to feelings of guilt, shame, hopelessness, despair, failure, rejection, anxiety and/or humiliation.

When a person is addicted to something they cannot control how they use it, and become dependent on it to cope with daily life.

## A habit may eventually develop into an addiction

Many of us can use substances or become engaged in activities without any significant problems. Some people, however, may experience damaging psychological and/or physical effects when their *habit* becomes an *addiction*.

## What is the difference between a habit and an addiction?

- **Addiction** - there is a psychological/physical component; the person is unable to control the aspects of the addiction without help because of the mental or physical conditions involved.
- **Habit** - it is done by choice. The person with the habit can choose to stop, and will subsequently stop successfully if they want to. The psychological/physical component is not an issue as it is with an addiction.

**Put simply** - with a habit you are in control of your choices, with an addiction you are not in control of your choices.

Addiction to substances or activities can sometimes lead to serious problems at home, work, school and socially.

The causes of addiction vary considerably, and are not often fully understood. They are generally caused by a combination of physical, mental, circumstantial and emotional factors.

Addiction, often referred to as *dependency* often leads to *tolerance* - the addicted person needs larger and more regular amounts of whatever they are addicted to in order to receive the same effect. Often, the initial reward is no longer felt, and the addiction continues because withdrawal is so unpleasant.

According to Medilexicon's Medical Dictionary:

**Addiction** is *Habitual psychological or physiologic dependence on a substance or practice that is beyond voluntary control. Withdrawal* has many meanings, one of which is *A psychological and/or physical syndrome caused by the abrupt cessation of the use of a drug in an habituated person.*

According to the current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*, published by the American Psychiatric Association:

**Substance dependence** is *When an individual persists in use of alcohol or other drugs despite problems related to use of the substance, substance dependence may be diagnosed. Compulsive and repetitive use may result in tolerance to the effect of the drug and withdrawal symptoms when use is reduced or stopped. This, along with Substance Abuse are considered Substance Use Disorders..*

## **Addiction may include prescription medications**

Most people think of illegal drugs when they hear the word “addiction”. However, [prescription drug addiction is becoming a serious public health problem in the USA and many other nations](#). Prescription medication abuse was described as “an epidemic” by researchers from the University of Nebraska Medical Center College of Medicine in a study they reported on in November 2012.

The scientists explained that doctors today treat pain differently than they used to years ago. This change has led to an increase in prescription drug abuse.

In the USA in the 1990s - the decade of pain treatment - not only was there a change in medication, but also policy. Pain became the fifth vital sign doctors looked out for, along with respiratory rate, blood pressure, body temperature and pulse rate. Doctors’ offices today commonly have signs in their waiting rooms asking patients to rate their experience of physical pain from 1 to 10.

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