

CONNECTICUT Clearinghouse

A Program of Wheeler Clinic

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FACTS ABOUT Drug and Alcohol Addiction, Treatment, Recovery and Use

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

Drug and alcohol use, abuse, and addiction continue to be among the nation's leading public health problems. Millions of Americans struggle every day with their own drug and alcohol problems. The toll these problems take on these individuals is considerable, as they are at increased risk for very serious health problems, criminal activity, automobile crashes, and lost productivity in the workplace. But individuals with drug and alcohol problems are not the only casualties. Their families, friends, and communities, in fact, society as a whole, also suffer greatly.

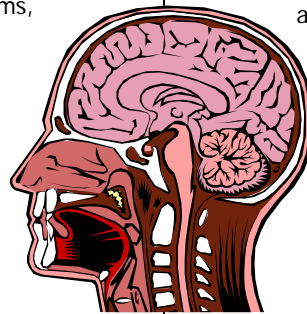
The good news is that treatment from drug and alcohol addiction is available and effective. Run by qualified, accredited, and dedicated professionals, treatment programs and services that meet rigorous state standards are the backbone of the public health response needed to address this nationwide epidemic. The range of treatment and recovery program options is considerable; however, it is still not as comprehensive, available, or affordable as it needs to be to ensure that everyone who needs effective treatment can get it. In fact, of the five million people with severe drug or alcohol addiction, only a little more than two million receive treatment – a gap of almost 60 percent.

For those individuals who are able to receive treatment for their drug or alcohol problems, one irrefutable fact remains – the support of family, friends, and the community at large is a critical facet of the overall recovery process. Their role in timely intervention, motivating the individual with the problem to seek help and supporting that person throughout his or her efforts to maintain sobriety cannot and should not be underestimated.

Here are some key facts about addiction, treatment, recovery, and alcohol and drug use that everyone should know:

Understanding Addiction and the Recovery Process

➤ Although addiction to drugs or alcohol begins with a personal choice to use these substances, research shows that, for many, a physiologically based dependence soon sets in. Drug dependence produces significant and lasting changes in brain chemistry and function.



- Most individuals who use illicit drugs or alcohol stop at the “experimental” or “recreational” stage. For a variety of complex reasons, which may involve heredity, social or environmental factors, or other variables, some individuals’ use progresses to a more problematic phase, or substance abuse. Without appropriate intervention, use may become habitual and evolve into physical and psychological dependency, or addiction.
- Research has shown that long-term drug use results in significant changes in brain function that persist long after the individual stops using drugs. These drug-induced changes in brain function may have behavioral consequences, including the compulsion to use drugs despite adverse consequences – the defining characteristic of addiction.
- Alcoholism comprises a set of complex behaviors in which an individual becomes increasingly preoccupied with obtaining alcohol. These behaviors ultimately lead to a loss of control over consumption of the drug and to the development of tolerance, dependence, and impaired social and occupational functioning.
- Addiction is a chronic medical illness, much like type 2 diabetes mellitus and hypertension, that can be treated. Often it is the result of some combination of genetic heritability, personal choice, and environmental factors.
- In the past, drug dependence has been treated like an acute illness, one that can and should be “cured” virtually overnight. More often than not, this unrealistic expectation is not met. However, when addiction is treated as the long-term, chronic, relapsing illness it really is, success rates are comparable to those associated with treating other chronic health problems, such as hypertension, diabetes, and asthma.
- Recovery from drug or alcohol addiction is a process, one that by its very nature may include relapse. Occasional relapses during recovery are to be expected and are not indications of failure. For some individuals, recovery is a more lengthy process than it is for others. So long as efforts are being made on the part of the recovering individual to maintain sobriety and adhere to treatment and recovery program guidelines, progress in the process is being made.

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- Family members and friends of individuals with drug and alcohol problems also experience a host of negative physical, emotional, and spiritual repercussions. They too need ongoing support programs and services to help them cope with addiction, understand and deal with the recovery process, and support their loved one's efforts to get well.

Social Benefits of Drug and Alcohol Treatment

- Treatment for drug and alcohol addiction cuts drug use in half, reduces criminal activity up to 80%, increases employment, decreases homelessness, improves physical and mental health, reduces medical costs, and reduces risky sexual behaviors.
- The cost of untreated drug and alcohol addiction in the U.S. in a given year is estimated at \$276 billion in lost productivity, law enforcement, health care, justice, welfare, and other programs and services. That's an annual cost of \$1,050 for every man, woman, and child in America. In contrast, it would cost about \$45 per year per each American to provide the full continuum of services needed to effectively treat addictive disorders. Of course, the return on investment in terms of restored lives is incalculable.
- According to several conservative estimates, every \$1 invested in addiction treatment programs yields a return of between \$4 and \$7 in reduced drug-related crime, criminal justice costs, and theft. When savings related to health care are included, total savings can exceed costs by a ratio of 12 to 1.
- Treatment also produces major savings to the individual and society in the form of significant drops in interpersonal conflicts, improvements in workplace productivity, and reduction in drug-related accidents.

Understanding Effective Drug Addiction Treatment

- Drug addiction treatment should include behavioral therapy such as counseling, cognitive therapy or psychotherapy, or any combination thereof and may include medications.
- In order to be truly effective, especially when treating at-risk or hard-to reach populations, treatment programs must provide a combination of culturally competent therapies and other services. Factors that must be considered include: age, race, culture, language, sexual orientation, gender, pregnancy status, parental responsibilities, housing and employment, physical disability, the existence of co-occurring mental illness, and any past history of physical and sexual abuse.
- Because drug and alcohol addiction is typically a chronic disorder characterized by occasional relapses, a short-term, one-time treatment often is not sufficient. For many, treatment is a long-term process that involves multiple interventions and attempts at abstinence.

The Role of Family, Friends, and Community in Treatment and Recovery

- Successful treatment outcomes often depend upon retaining the person with the drug or alcohol problem long enough to gain the full benefits of treatment. Whether or not a person stays in treatment depends on a number of factors, including; personal motivation to change behavior; the degree of support provided by family and friends; and whether or not there is pressure to stay in treatment from the criminal justice system, child protection services, employers, or the family.
- Community-based recovery groups, most often in the form of 12-step programs, can complement and extend the effects of professional treatment by supporting individuals throughout the recovery process.
- Family and friends can play critical roles in motivating individuals with drug and alcohol problems to enter treatment, stay in it, and maintain sobriety. Family therapy is also important, especially for adolescents. Additional support is available through the recovery community in the form of 12-step programs.
- Family members and friends who attend 12-step support programs report strong improvements in their mental health/well-being, ability to function each day at home/work/school, and overall health status.

Information Provided by:
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