

# Treating Drug Dependency

Dependence on drugs can have devastating effects on individual lives and relationships. Once you realize that you or someone you love may be addicted to the effects of a drug, such as alcohol, nicotine, cocaine, or heroin, seek help right away. As with other diseases, getting treatment as soon as possible can prevent further complications and may even save a life. Your doctor can explain the options for treating substance abuse and addiction.

An article in the March 8, 2000,

issue of *JAMA* reports on a study of patients diagnosed with **opiate dependence** (dependence on such drugs as opium, heroin, and morphine) who volunteered to participate in treatment programs that used **methadone**. The study compared methadone **detoxification** (gradual dose reduction) to **maintenance therapy** (more long-term continuing treatment with methadone) and found that outcomes were generally better with maintenance therapy.

## WHAT IS METHADONE:

Methadone is a synthetic opiate that has less severe withdrawal symptoms than other opiate drugs. Methadone blocks the effects of other opiates, so that persons who take methadone do not experience cravings for the effects of the drugs. Patients given this treatment are able to function well during methadone therapy and can become productive members of their communities by returning to their jobs and other activities without experiencing the more debilitating withdrawal symptoms.

Since methadone is taken by mouth, it eliminates the risk of contracting many of the infectious diseases associated with injection drug use. Methadone treatment is usually combined with drug abuse counseling and other supportive services.

## DANGERS OF OPIATE ABUSE:

- Using opiates puts a person at risk for convulsions, respiratory failure, pneumonia, coma, shock, and death from an overdose.
- Using injected drugs puts a person at high risk for HIV, **hepatitis** (inflammation of the liver), and other blood-borne diseases when one shares needles and other drug-injecting equipment.
- Even if you don't share needles, injected drugs can introduce bacteria directly into the blood system, causing such complications as **endocarditis** (infections of the heart and heart valves), **tetanus** (a serious disease of the central nervous system), and **lung abscesses** (collections of pus caused by an infection that damage lungs).
- If you are pregnant, your baby is at increased risk for being born prematurely. Your baby will also be born addicted to whatever drug you are using and therefore have to spend the first days of his or her life experiencing painful withdrawal symptoms.
- Street drugs often have additives that can cause damage to such vital organs as the lungs, liver, kidneys, and brain.

## WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS FROM OPIATE ABUSE:

- Seizures
- Muscle and bone pain
- Abdominal cramps
- Diarrhea
- Vomiting
- Sleeplessness and restlessness

## SUPPORT FOR FRIENDS AND RELATIVES:

If you have a friend or family member who is addicted to drugs you can receive information and support by contacting a local Al-Anon chapter (for those affected by alcoholism) or Nar-Anon (for those affected by other drugs).

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Institute on Drug Abuse [www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov)
- National Clearinghouse on Alcohol and Drug Information 800/729-6686 or [www.health.org](http://www.health.org)
- Al-Anon Family Groups, Inc. 888/4-AL-ANON (Mon. – Fri. 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. ET) or [www.al-anon.org](http://www.al-anon.org)
- Nar-Anon Family Groups, Inc. 310/547-5800 (Mon. – Thurs. 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. PT)

## INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at [www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm](http://www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm). Previous *JAMA* Patient Pages were published on alcohol abuse (April 14, 1999 and January 6, 1999).

*Additional Sources:* National Institute on Drug Abuse, *The AMA Family Medical Guide*, *The AMA Complete Guide to Women's Health*, *The AMA Encyclopedia of Medicine*

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