

Substance misuse

Substance misuse refers to an inappropriate or excessive use of alcohol, illegal drugs or over-the-counter or prescription medications. Substance misuse is a pattern of drug use that leads to significant problems to a person's health and life.

Around 1 in 20 Australians has an addiction or substance abuse problem.



Why do people misuse alcohol and other drugs?

People use drugs and drink alcohol for lots of different reasons. It may be a form of relaxation, a way of having fun or a means of escape from emotions, physical pain or problems they are experiencing.

Excessive use of drugs or alcohol can cause a person to become dependent on the substance, and this can have serious consequences. It may mean they stop feeling the effects of the substance, and they experience cravings or withdrawal symptoms when they cease using it.

Although addiction can occur at any age, the earlier people begin to use drugs, the more likely they are to develop serious problems with substance use. Other risk factors include lower peer refusal skills, whether or not drugs have been made readily available to the person and if they have experienced a chaotic home life. Research suggests that genetics can also play a role in addiction. If a person has family members who have experienced addiction, they may be more likely to experience it too.

Risks of substance misuse

There are both short-term and long-term effects of substance misuse. Misuse of legal or illegal drugs can result in brain damage, accidental overdose or death. Drug use is also a risk factor for suicidality. Aside from physical and mental health problems, people can experience family or relationship conflicts, work issues or financial issues as a result of excessive substance use.

Signs of substance misuse

Signs of substance misuse or addiction will vary depending on the person and the type of drug. There are, however, certain indications that a person might be using drugs:

- **Neglecting family, work or social responsibilities.**
- **Becoming disengaged from activities previously enjoyed, such as hobbies, sports or social outings.**
- **Partaking in risky, dangerous or criminal behaviours.**
- **Relationship problems, including difficulty maintaining relationships or conflict you're your partner, family or friends.**
- **Noticing a tolerance to the substance or symptoms of withdrawal when not using the substance.**
- **Experiencing symptoms of mental illness such as depression, anxiety, paranoia or psychosis.**
- **Unable to reduce or stop using the substance, or noticing that substance use has impaired your ability to function.**

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING SUBSTANCE MISUSE

1

Mental health professionals.

If you are struggling with drug and alcohol misuse, go and see your GP, a mental health professional, such as a doctor who specialises in addiction medicine or addiction psychiatry, or a licensed alcohol and drug counsellor.

2

Helpline or hotlines.

There are a number of helplines and hotlines available for support. These include Alcoholics Anonymous Australia (1300 222 222), Quitline (13 78 48), Lifeline (13 11 14) and the National Alcohol and Other Drug hotline (1800 250 015).

3

Family support.

If you are concerned that a loved one may have a problem with their substance use, you can see your GP or contact the above hotlines for advice on what to do. Family therapy can also help address issue that may be contributing to an addiction.

4

Behaviour therapy.

Cognitive behavioural therapy can be effective for addiction. Also known as CBT, cognitive behavioural therapy is a psychological treatment that is widely used in addiction treatment. Counselling from a licensed alcohol and drug counsellor, Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) or alcohol detox and rehab programs can also be effective.