

Warning Signs of Alcohol and Substance Misuse



What Is Substance Misuse?

Substance misuse refers to the use of illegal substances, or the inappropriate use of legal substances, such as alcohol or tobacco.

Substance misuse can lead to a variety of health complications including substance use disorder (SUD), a health condition that affects a person's mental health and behavior. SUDs lead individuals to have difficulty controlling their use of substances such as alcohol, medications, and legal or illegal drugs.

Warning Signs of Substance Misuse

It is important to note that each warning sign on its own is not an indicator of substance misuse, but a combination of multiple signs may be cause for concern.

- Substance misuse refers to the use of illegal substances, or the inappropriate use of legal substances.
- There can be a variety of warning signs that a person is using or misusing substances.
- The signs of substance misuse vary depending on the substance being used.
- Treatment for substance misuse or substance use disorders may include a combination of medication and behavioral therapy.

Physical

- Abnormal pupils (larger or smaller than usual).
- Bloodshot eyes.
- Changes in appetite or sleep.
- Persistent runny or stuffy nose.
- Sudden weight loss or gain.
- Loss of coordination, tremors, or slurred speech.
- Change in appearance or grooming habits.
- Unusual odors on breath or clothing.

Psychological

- Appearing anxious, paranoid, or fearful with no apparent reason.
- Lacking motivation, seeming tired or "spaced-out".
- Periods of abnormally high energy or instability.
- Mood swings.
- Unexplained attitude or personality changes.

Behavioral

- Acting secretive or suspicious.
- Problems in relationships with others.
- Abandoning responsibilities or previously enjoyed activities.
- Sudden changes in friends, hobbies, and favored activities.
- High risk use (i.e. while driving, using dirty needles, etc.).
- Increased tolerance (using more to get the same effects).
- Misusing substances to avoid withdrawal symptoms.
- Life revolving around using.
- Continuing to use despite negative outcomes (blackouts, mood swings, infections, etc.)



Wheeler

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

Warning Signs For Commonly Misused Substances

The signs of substance misuse can vary depending on the substance being used.

Substance	Warning Signs
Alcohol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underage or binge drinking • Anxious or stressed if a gathering or event does not include alcohol • Drinking alone/concealing use • Drinking frequently, or large amounts
Depressants (Ex: Xanax, Valium, GHB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small pupils • Difficulty concentrating • Slurring words • Sleepiness
Inhalants (Ex: Glues, Aerosols, Vapors)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watery eyes • Rashes around nose and mouth • Headaches • Nausea • Changes in appetite • Cans or aerosols in the trash
Hallucinogens (Ex: LSD, PCP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large pupils • Paranoia • Slurred speech • Confusion
Opioids	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small pupils • Needle marks • Sweating • Vomiting • Sleepiness
Stimulants (Ex: Cocaine, Amphetamines)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large pupils • Hyperactivity • Anxiety • Weight loss • Frequent dry mouth/nose

Connecticut Resources

CT Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services
www.ct.gov/DMHAS

CT Stronger
<https://ctstronger.org/alcohol-use-disorder/>

Drug Free CT
<https://www.drugfreect.org/>

24/7 Access Line
 1.800.563.4086

2-1-1 of Connecticut
www.211ct.org or call 2-1-1

National Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
www.samhsa.gov

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)
www.nida.nih.gov

How Are Substance Use Disorders Treated?

Substance use disorders are treatable conditions. Treatment typically involves a combination of behavioral and medical therapies

Behavioral therapy can vary depending on the needs of the person. Outpatient therapy can include cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) or group sessions. In other cases, therapeutic, live-in communities may work best.

Medications will also vary depending on the specific substance. Medications exist to treat opioid, alcohol, and nicotine use disorders. Medications may also be prescribed to treat withdrawal symptoms, cravings, and co-occurring disorders.



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