

Misuse and Addiction: What's the Difference?

Understanding the pattern helps us choose the right support



The words can overlap, but they do not mean exactly the same thing

Neither term describes somebody's worth. The important questions are what is happening, what harm is occurring, and what support is needed.

MISUSE OR HARMFUL USE

A substance, medicine or behaviour is being used in a way that causes risk or harm. This might mean using more than intended, using in unsafe situations, mixing substances, using somebody else's medicine, or continuing despite effects on health, money, work or relationships.

ADDICTION

There is increasing loss of control: strong urges or cravings, repeated difficulty cutting down, and continuing even when harm is clear. The substance or behaviour may take priority over responsibilities, relationships and things the person once valued.

DEPENDENCE

The body or mind has adapted. Tolerance may mean needing more for the same effect. Withdrawal symptoms may appear when use is reduced or stopped. Dependence can occur with prescribed medicines and does not automatically mean addiction.

THEY CAN EXIST TOGETHER

Misuse can happen without addiction, but it can still be dangerous. Addiction may develop gradually and is not defined only by how often somebody uses. A person does not need to "hit rock bottom" before asking for help.

Questions that matter more than a label

- Can I choose not to use, or do I feel driven to?
- Have I tried to cut down but found I could not?
- Am I hiding it, planning around it, or using to cope with feelings?
- Is it harming my health, safety, finances, work or relationships?

Support can begin at any stage

A GP, pharmacist or local drug and alcohol service can help you reduce harm, review medicines and make a safe plan. You can ask for help even if you are unsure about stopping completely.

Safety warning

Alcohol-dependent? Do not stop suddenly. Get medical advice first. Call 999 for severe withdrawal symptoms.

This is not a moral failing. Understanding the pattern is a step towards change.