

Polysubstance Misuse

Understanding the added risks when alcohol, medicines or drugs are combined

Substance misuse can develop quietly. A substance may begin as a way to cope, sleep, socialise, manage pain, increase confidence or get through difficult feelings. This guide is here to help you notice patterns with curiosity rather than judgement.

What it means

Polysubstance use means using more than one substance, either together or within the same period. This can include alcohol, illicit drugs, prescribed medicines and over-the-counter products.

Why combinations matter

Substances can interact in unpredictable ways. Combining sedatives can suppress breathing, while mixing stimulants may increase cardiovascular strain. One drug can also mask the effects of another, making it easier to take too much.

A useful assessment

It is important to look at every substance being used, the timing, dose, reason for use, prescribed medicines, physical health and previous withdrawal experiences.

Support and safety

Professional support can help create a safer, coordinated plan. If there is unconsciousness, abnormal breathing, seizure, chest pain or severe confusion, seek emergency help immediately.

A gentle check-in

Ask yourself: What does this substance do for me? What happens before I use it? What happens afterwards? What has become harder because of it? What support would make change feel more possible?

Notice	Consider
Triggers, cravings, quantity, secrecy, sleep, mood and consequences.	GP support, local drug/alcohol services, counselling, trusted people and practical harm-reduction advice.

Important safety note

This resource is educational and does not replace medical assessment. Some substances can cause dangerous withdrawal or overdose. If there is unconsciousness, severe breathing difficulty, seizure, collapse, chest pain or immediate danger, seek emergency medical help.

You deserve support that looks at the whole person - not just the substance.