

What Is Substance Misuse?

Understanding use, risk, impact and where to find help and support

Substance misuse is a broad term for using alcohol, medicines or other psychoactive substances in a way that causes harm, creates significant risk or begins to interfere with health and everyday life. It is not a moral judgement and it does not require somebody to fit a stereotype. A person's pattern can change over time, and difficulties can develop around legal substances, prescribed medicines or illicit drugs.

Use, harmful use and dependence are not the same thing

Use A substance is taken, but this alone does not tell us whether the person is experiencing a disorder or significant harm.	Risky or harmful use The pattern increases danger or is already contributing to physical, emotional, social, financial or occupational harm.
Dependence Use can become increasingly difficult to control, with craving, tolerance, withdrawal or a strong priority given to the substance.	Substance use disorder Clinical assessment considers a wider pattern of impaired control, consequences and physiological features rather than relying on one sign.

Why people use substances

People may use substances for pleasure, curiosity, social connection, confidence, pain relief, energy, sleep or relaxation. For others, use becomes a way of managing trauma, anxiety, low mood, loneliness, sensory overload, difficult memories or chronic stress. These reasons do not remove the risks, but understanding the function of the substance can make treatment more relevant. Simply taking something away without addressing what it was doing can leave a significant gap.

Tolerance and withdrawal

Tolerance means that a person may need more of a substance to experience an effect that previously occurred at a lower level. Withdrawal describes symptoms that can occur when a dependent person's substance level falls. Withdrawal varies enormously between substances. Alcohol and benzodiazepine withdrawal can be medically dangerous after dependence and should not be managed through an unsupported abrupt stop. Opioid dependence also benefits from specialist assessment and evidence-based treatment.

Physical and mental-health effects

The possible effects depend on the substance, amount, frequency, route, combinations, individual health and the reliability of what was supplied. Risks can include overdose, accidents, heart or breathing problems, organ damage, infection, sleep disruption, nutrition problems and impaired coordination. Mental-health effects can include anxiety, depression, irritability, paranoia, altered perception, reduced concentration and worsening of existing difficulties.

When several substances overlap

Alcohol, prescribed medication and illicit substances can interact. Sedating combinations can increase breathing suppression and overdose risk, while stimulant combinations can increase cardiovascular strain and agitation. A stimulant does not make a depressant 'safe' by making someone feel more awake. Healthcare professionals need the complete picture, including prescribed and occasional substances.

Warning signs

Increasing tolerance; withdrawal; strong cravings; using more than intended; repeated unsuccessful attempts to reduce; hiding use; missing responsibilities; financial problems; risky driving; injuries; relationship conflict; using to feel normal; neglecting food, sleep or self-care; and continuing despite clear harm are all reasons to seek support.

Trauma, stress and stigma

Substance difficulties often sit alongside experiences that deserve attention in their own right. Trauma-informed support asks what has happened and what the substance has helped the person survive or manage, without assuming that trauma explains every case. Stigma can delay treatment: language that reduces somebody to a drug or a diagnosis can make honesty harder. Respectful care still allows clear conversations about risk.

A first reflection

Ask four questions: **What do I use? What does it do for me in the moment? What does it cost me afterwards? What would I need if the substance were not doing that job?** The answers can provide a useful starting point for a GP, drug service or therapist.

What Is Substance Misuse? — Help, Treatment & Recovery

Support should fit the person, the substance, the risks and the reasons behind use

When to seek urgent help

Call **999** for suspected overdose or serious acute symptoms such as unconsciousness, inability to wake, abnormal or severely slowed breathing, a seizure, collapse, severe chest pain, signs of stroke, dangerous overheating or severe confusion. Tell emergency services what may have been taken. If opioids may be involved and naloxone is available, use it according to its instructions while emergency help is on the way.

Where to get help in the UK

GP	A useful starting point for physical and mental-health assessment, medication review, withdrawal concerns and referral to specialist services.
Local drug & alcohol service	Many services accept self-referrals and can assess substance use, dependence, overdose risk, harm reduction, treatment and wider practical needs.
FRANK	Confidential UK drug information and advice: 0300 123 6600 ; text 82111 . It can also help people locate services.
Mutual aid	Options include UK SMART Recovery and substance-specific peer groups. Different approaches suit different people.
Family support	Families and partners can seek support in their own right through local services and family-focused organisations or mutual-aid programmes.
Urgent care	999 for emergencies. NHS 111 can advise about urgent medical concerns that are not immediately life-threatening.

What treatment can look like

Treatment is not one fixed programme. It may include a keyworker, motivational approaches, cognitive and behavioural therapies, relapse-prevention work, mutual aid, medication for some forms of dependence, medically supported withdrawal where needed, family work and practical support. Recovery may also involve treating pain, sleep problems, trauma, anxiety, depression, housing difficulties or isolation.

Recovery does not have to begin with certainty

Some people arrive wanting to stop completely; others want to reduce harm or understand whether their use has become a problem. A good assessment can start from where the person is. The immediate priority may be preventing overdose, making withdrawal safer, stabilising health or reducing one particularly dangerous combination before longer-term goals are decided.

Supporting someone else

Speak at a calm time and describe what you have noticed rather than trying to force a label. Encourage honest disclosure to professionals and learn emergency warning signs. You can care about somebody while still setting boundaries around money, aggression, children, driving and your own safety. Their recovery cannot depend on you carrying every consequence for them.

One book to explore

***Overcoming Your Alcohol or Drug Problem: Effective Recovery Strategies* — Dennis C. Daley and G. Alan Marlatt.** This is a practical recovery-focused resource that looks at patterns, triggers, motivation and relapse prevention. It can help readers think beyond the substance itself and understand the situations surrounding use. It should sit alongside professional assessment when there is dependence, significant physical risk or medically risky withdrawal.

A message from Maggie

Substance misuse is often talked about as though there is a clear line separating 'people with a problem' from everybody else. Real life is much less tidy. A substance can begin as something social, useful or relieving and gradually take on more jobs. If you are questioning your relationship with a substance, you do not have to wait until everything has fallen apart to talk about it. Curiosity about what is happening is a valid place to begin.

Clinical note

This resource provides general education and does not diagnose a substance use disorder or replace medical care. Risks and withdrawal differ between substances and individuals. Alcohol or benzodiazepine withdrawal after dependence can be dangerous. Suspected overdose or another immediate medical emergency requires 999. Service information should be checked before publication.