

6.4: Treatment Approaches for Drug Addiction

Can drug addiction be treated?

Yes, but it's not simple. Because addiction is a chronic disease, people can't simply stop using drugs for a few days and be cured. Most patients need long-term or repeated care to stop using completely and recover their lives.

Addiction treatment must help the person do the following:

- stop using drugs
- stay drug-free
- be productive in the family, at work, and in society

Principles of Effective Treatment

Based on scientific research since the mid-1970s, the following key principles should form the basis of any effective treatment program:

- Addiction is a complex but treatable disease that affects brain function and behavior.
- No single treatment is right for everyone.
- People need to have quick access to treatment.
- Effective treatment addresses all of the patient's needs, not just his or her drug use.
- Staying in treatment long enough is critical.
- Counseling and other behavioral therapies are the most commonly used forms of treatment.
- Medications are often an important part of treatment, especially when combined with behavioral therapies.
- Treatment plans must be reviewed often and modified to fit the patient's changing needs.
- Treatment should address other possible mental disorders.
- Medically assisted detoxification is only the first stage of treatment.
- Treatment doesn't need to be voluntary to be effective.
- Drug use during treatment must be monitored continuously.
- Treatment programs should test patients for HIV/AIDS, hepatitis B and C, tuberculosis, and other infectious diseases as well as teach them about steps they can take to reduce their risk of these illnesses.

How is drug addiction treated?

Successful treatment has several steps:

- detoxification (the process by which the body rids itself of a drug)
- behavioral counseling
- medication (for opioid, tobacco, or alcohol addiction)
- evaluation and treatment for co-occurring mental health issues such as depression and anxiety
- long-term follow-up to prevent relapse

A range of care with a tailored treatment program and follow-up options can be crucial to success. Treatment should include both medical and mental health services as needed. Follow-up care may include community- or family-based recovery support systems.

How are medications used in drug addiction treatment?

Medications can be used to manage withdrawal symptoms, prevent relapse, and treat co-occurring conditions.

Withdrawal. Medications help suppress withdrawal symptoms during detoxification. Detoxification is not in itself "treatment," but only the first step in the process. Patients who do not receive any further treatment after detoxification usually resume their drug use. One study of treatment facilities found that medications were used in almost 80 percent of detoxifications (SAMHSA, 2014).

Relapse prevention. Patients can use medications to help re-establish normal brain function and decrease cravings. Medications are available for treatment of opioid (heroin, prescription pain relievers), tobacco (nicotine), and alcohol addiction. Scientists are developing other medications to treat stimulant (cocaine, methamphetamine) and cannabis (marijuana) addiction. People who use more than one drug, which is very common, need treatment for all of the substances they use.

- **Opioids:** Methadone (Dolophine®), Methadose®, buprenorphine (Suboxone®, Subutex®, Probuphine®), and naltrexone (Vivitrol®) are used to treat opioid addiction. Acting on the same targets in the brain as heroin and morphine, methadone and buprenorphine suppress withdrawal symptoms and relieve cravings. Naltrexone blocks the effects of opioids at their receptor sites in the brain and should be used only in patients who have already been detoxified. All medications help patients reduce drug seeking and related criminal behavior and help them become more open to behavioral treatments.
- **Tobacco:** Nicotine replacement therapies have several forms, including the patch, spray, gum, and lozenges. These products are available over the counter. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved two prescription medications for nicotine addiction: bupropion (Zyban®) and varenicline (Chantix®). They work differently in the brain, but both help prevent relapse in people trying to quit. The medications are more effective when combined with behavioral treatments, such as group and individual therapy as well as telephone quitlines.
- **Alcohol:** Three medications have been FDA-approved for treating alcohol addiction and a fourth, topiramate, has shown promise in clinical trials (large-scale studies with people). The three approved medications are as follows:
 - **Naltrexone** blocks opioid receptors that are involved in the rewarding effects of drinking and in the craving for alcohol. It reduces relapse to heavy drinking and is highly effective in some patients. Genetic differences may affect how well the drug works in certain patients.
 - **Acamprosate (Campral®)** may reduce symptoms of long-lasting withdrawal, such as insomnia, anxiety, restlessness, and dysphoria (generally feeling unwell or unhappy). It may be more effective in patients with severe addiction.
 - **Disulfiram (Antabuse®)** interferes with the breakdown of alcohol. Acetaldehyde builds up in the body, leading to unpleasant reactions that include flushing (warmth and redness in the face), nausea, and irregular heartbeat if the patient drinks alcohol. Compliance (taking the drug as prescribed) can be a problem, but it may help patients who are highly motivated to quit drinking.
- **Co-occurring conditions:** Other medications are available to treat possible mental health conditions, such as depression or anxiety, that may be contributing to the person's addiction.



How are behavioral therapies used to treat drug addiction?

Behavioral therapies help patients:

- modify their attitudes and behaviors related to drug use

- increase healthy life skills
- persist with other forms of treatment, such as medication

Patients can receive treatment in many different settings with various approaches.

Outpatient behavioral treatment includes a wide variety of programs for patients who visit a behavioral health counselor on a regular schedule. Most of the programs involve individual or group drug counseling, or both. These programs typically offer forms of behavioral therapy such as:

- *cognitive-behavioral therapy*, which helps patients recognize, avoid, and cope with the situations in which they are most likely to use drugs
- *multidimensional family therapy*—developed for adolescents with drug abuse problems as well as their families—which addresses a range of influences on their drug abuse patterns and is designed to improve overall family functioning
- *motivational interviewing*, which makes the most of people's readiness to change their behavior and enter treatment
- *motivational incentives* (contingency management), which uses positive reinforcement to encourage abstinence from drugs

Treatment is sometimes intensive at first, where patients attend multiple outpatient sessions each week. After completing intensive treatment, patients transition to regular outpatient treatment, which meets less often and for fewer hours per week to help sustain their recovery.

Inpatient or residential treatment can also be very effective, especially for those with more severe problems (including co-occurring disorders). Licensed residential treatment facilities offer 24-hour structured and intensive care, including safe housing and medical attention. Residential treatment facilities may use a variety of therapeutic approaches, and they are generally aimed at helping the patient live a drug-free, crime-free lifestyle after treatment.

Points to Remember

- Drug addiction can be treated, but it's not simple. Addiction treatment must help the person do the following:
 - stop using drugs
 - stay drug-free
 - be productive in the family, at work, and in society
- Successful treatment has several steps:
 - detoxification
 - behavioral counseling
 - medication (for opioid, tobacco, or alcohol addiction)
 - evaluation and treatment for co-occurring mental health issues such as depression and anxiety
 - long-term follow-up to prevent relapse
- Medications can be used to manage withdrawal symptoms, prevent relapse, and treat co-occurring conditions.
- Behavioral therapies help patients:
 - modify their attitudes and behaviors related to drug use
 - increase healthy life skills
 - persist with other forms of treatment, such as medication
- People within the criminal justice system may need additional treatment services to treat drug use disorders effectively. However, many offenders don't have access to the types of services they need

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