

What are the Health and Human Consequences of Substance Abuse?

Alcohol, tobacco, and drugs bring a major toll on our society. Individuals struggling with addiction to those drugs and the individuals around them suffer enormously. In fact, tobacco is the top and alcohol the third (after poor diet and physical inactivity) cause of mortality in our society. Tobacco causes lung cancer in smokers and to their loved ones exposed to the smoke, as well as range of respiratory and other diseases. Alcohol is associated with more than 60 acute and chronic conditions, including poisoning, car crashes, violence, suicide, crime, cancers, cirrhosis, hemorrhagic strokes, and neuropsychiatric conditions. Even though some health benefits have been associated with alcohol use, those are limited to individuals who drink small quantities, and the net effect of alcohol on health is negative. In addition, America is facing a growing epidemic, the rise of prescription drug abuse (in particular pain killers), which has been associated with a dramatic increase in emergency room visits and deaths by overdose.

From the New York Times on April 19, 2011: "Tuesday, the Obama administration announced plans to fight prescription drug addiction nationally, noting that it was now killing more people than crack cocaine in the 1980s and heroin in the 1970s combined."

During pregnancy, alcohol, tobacco, and drugs, even when consumed in small quantity, can have significant and irreversible effects on the unborn child and his/her future development. Smoking during pregnancy leads to many complications for the mother and her baby, including being born too early (premature birth), or too small (low birth weight), and long term developmental consequences. Alcohol use during pregnancy is associated with many short-term and long-term problems (it is the leading preventable cause of mental retardation in the US), and abstinence is recommended for pregnant women.

Abused substances produce some form of intoxication that alters judgment, perception, attention, or physical control. Drug overdose may also cause death. Many substances can bring on a withdrawal reaction - an effect caused by cessation or reduction in the amount of the substance used. Withdrawal can range from mild anxiety to seizures and hallucinations and even death. If you are a regular drinker or abuse benzodiazepines (such as valium, xanax, ativan), you should not stop without medical supervision!