



camh

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
Centre de toxicomanie et de santé mentale

Understanding Addiction web article

What is addiction?

Addiction is a habit or behavior that is often hard to stop and that, more and more, interferes with a person's life. Some one could be dependent on a substance, such as alcohol or another drug, or an activity, such as gambling.

There is no single reason why someone misuses alcohol or other drugs, or why someone gambles compulsively. Many of us develop an addiction to cope with life's problems. For a while, the substance use or gambling may mask our pain, and take away our fear. However, the solution eventually becomes the problem – a problem that often destroys relationships and families.

Is an addiction easy to identify?

Someone does not have to be showing overt signs of a problem to have an addiction.

It's easy to become dependent on a drug or an activity without immediately realizing it. Even people living with or close to someone with an addiction may not be aware of the person's problem for some time.

What are the signs and symptoms of an addiction?

Many people drink alcohol, use other drugs, or gamble without encountering problems. However, some find that, somewhere along the way, they have "crossed over a line" and have lost the ability to make reasonable decisions.

The signs of an addiction vary widely, depending on the problem and the person. A drug use or activity is a problem when it:

- Affects mental and physical health
- Involves breaking the law (if the person is drinking and driving, or using or has illegal drugs)
- Threatens financial stability
- Harms relationships and friends
- Interferes with work

How are family members affected?

Family members usually learn ways to cope with problems linked to addiction. They may:

- Communicate less
- Avoid talking about the problem or expressing their feelings
- Hide the addiction from the community
- Take on responsibilities neglected by the person with the addiction
- Feel frustrated, angry, resentful, lonely, scared, and ashamed

Will treatment help?

Yes. An addiction is just like any other health problem. It needs to be identified before it can be treated. But it is treatable.

People think that they can just stop using a drug or stop gambling on their own. Although some people can, it's not always easy. Treatment programs and support groups can help reduce or eliminate the dependency.

It takes courage to take the first step toward getting help, but it doesn't have to be done alone.

When is it necessary to get help?

It is never too early or too late to get help.

Maybe you're not sure whether your or someone else's substance use or gambling is causing problems. Or perhaps you know there is a problem, but don't know where to go for help.

If you are worried about someone else, encourage that person to get help. If you are concerned for yourself, start by talking to someone you trust and respect, such as:

- A doctor or nurse
- An Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counsellor or the doctor or nurse at work.
- A counsellor or therapist in the community
- A social worker
- A spiritual leader

What happens in treatment?

Each service does something different. Here are some of the things they do:

- Explore how the addiction affects the persons life
- Plan a treatment program, and what will happen after treatment, with the person and then follow up when the person is in the community
- Link the person to other services
- Teach about the risks associated with the dependency
- Teach skills in leading a healthy, balanced life
- Provide one-on-one support and guidance and link the person to self-help or mutual support groups, like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)
- Offer support and information for the family

You don't have to suffer alone. Help is available.

Where to get help or more information:

McLaughlin Addiction and Mental Health Information Centre
1 800 463 6273
In Toronto 416 595 6111

Your local Public Health Unit – look in the blue pages of your local telephone directory or call 411.

Your local Community Information Centre – look in the blue pages of your local telephone directory or call 411.

Your local Settlement Services

www.settlement.org
www.ocasi.org
www.camh.net
www.211Toronto.ca

Adapted from:
What you need to know about addiction
Copyright ©2002 Canada Post with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health