ADDICTION EXPLAINED
AMERICAN SOCIETY OF ADDICTION MEDICINE

UNDERSTANDING ADDICTION

Addiction Is a Chronic Disease

Addiction is a long-term health condition that affects the brain and can impact daily life. Many factors can play a role in addiction, including a person's biology, life experiences, environment, and support system.

Like cancer, diabetes, and other chronic diseases, **addiction can be treated and managed**. Addiction makes it hard to control the use of substances like alcohol, opioids, and nicotine, or behaviors like gambling.

1 IN 6 AMERICANS

About 48.4 million people aged 12 or older are living with a substance use disorder.

How the Brain Learns What Matters

When an experience feels rewarding or important, the brain sends signals through its connected pathways. These signals help us pay attention to the experience, learn from it, remember it, and want to do it again.

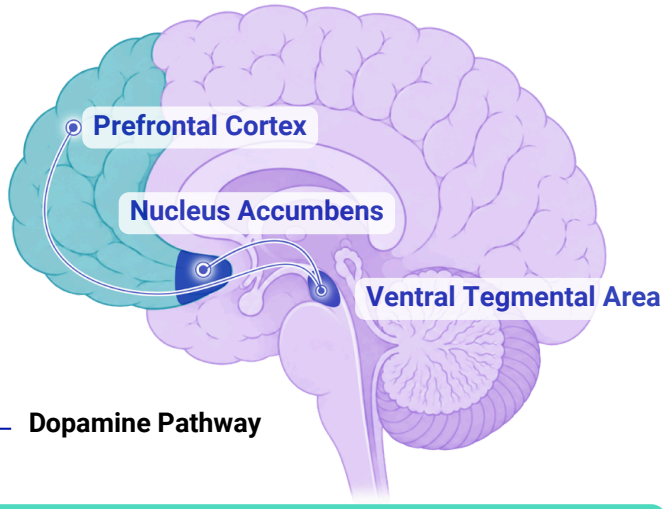
Dopamine is the brain's "pay attention to this" signal.

At the center of addiction is the **brain's reward system**. It uses a chemical called **dopamine** to help motivate us and guide our actions, including basic needs like eating, sleeping, and connecting with others.

THIS MATTERS
Dopamine tells the brain, "this is important."

REMEMBER THIS
It helps us learn from experiences.

DO THIS AGAIN
It makes us want to do the activity again.



Key Areas Involved in This Pathway

1. **Ventral Tegmental Area** releases dopamine and starts the signal
2. **Nucleus Accumbens** drives motivation and feelings of reward
3. **Prefrontal Cortex** supports decision-making and self-control

The same systems that are important for survival are involved in addiction.
This is one reason addiction is a powerful disease that is difficult to control.

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Factors Involved in Addiction

Addiction develops differently for different people. It can be influenced by life experiences and environment. Stress, trauma, mental health, relationships, social support, and access to resources can all play a role.


Stress


Relationships


Support & Resources


Genetics


Environment


Trauma & Mental Health

How Addiction Develops

Addiction affects how the brain learns, responds to rewards, and makes choices. Whether a substance or a behavior, addiction follows similar steps:

STEP 1: STRONG ACTIVATION OF THE REWARD SYSTEM

- Drugs, alcohol, and behaviors like gambling can overstimulate the brain's reward system.
- These experiences can trigger unusually strong dopamine signals.

STEP 2: LEARNING AND HABITS BEGIN TO CHANGE

- The substance or behavior can begin to feel extremely important.
- Over time, the brain may learn: "This is something I should repeat."

STEP 3: BRAIN SYSTEMS CHANGE OVER TIME

- It may take more to feel the same effect (tolerance).
- People, places, emotions, or stress can trigger cravings automatically.
- It becomes harder to pause, reflect, or resist cravings.
- Without the substance or behavior, people may feel anxious, irritable, or physically sick.

Recovery Is Possible

With treatment and support, people can build healthier habits, restore their brain chemistry, reconnect with what matters most, and live meaningful lives in recovery.

Ways to Get Help

Medications
Reduce cravings and withdrawal symptoms

Counseling
Identify triggers and build coping skills

Therapy
Address trauma, stress, and mental health

Supportive Relationships
Stay motivated and maintain positive changes

How to Get Help

- **SAMHSA National Helpline 1-800-662-HELP**
- **Talk to a healthcare professional**
- **Find local treatment programs**

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