

Six Signs & Symptoms of Opioid Dependence

Opioid dependence is often misunderstood as a failure of the will. Yet opioid dependence is a real chronic and progressive medical condition caused in part by changes in the chemistry of the brain that can result from regular opioid drug use. Dependence on opioids has been defined as a chronic brain disease by the American Society for Addiction Medicine and the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Once opioid dependence develops, it is a chronic disease that left untreated can be fatal.

The good news is that opioid dependence can be treated, and Dr. Carlos Tirado, Clinical Director of Chemical Dependency Services at Seton Shoal Creek Hospital and Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Austin, stresses that knowing the signs and symptoms of the disease is key:

1. **Drowsiness and lack of energy** – spending less time with old friends and skipping recreational activities.

“During the peak effect of opioid use, a person who is under the influence of opioids can appear drowsy with drooping eyes and appearing to nod off to sleep. While this may be mistaken for ‘just being tired,’ individuals may demonstrate this pattern at various times throughout the day.”

2. **Inability to concentrate and lack of motivation** – negative changes with work and/or school.

“Opioids can diminish a patient’s attention and concentration, and interfere with learning. The combined effect of cognitive impairment and the need to take the drug regularly to avoid withdrawal makes it difficult for an individual to maintain a high level of academic and work performance, often resulting in missed days of work, leaving school or work during the day or a significant drop in grades/performance.”

3. **Social behavioral changes** – isolation and changing social groups.

“Due to the frequent level of drug use, the drowsiness, tiredness and inability to concentrate often make it difficult for the individual to maintain normal friendships and healthy lifestyle habits like sports, social clubs and hobbies. Friendships and healthy ‘pro-social’ activities begin to drift off in favor of social isolation and/or friends who are engaged in similar behaviors.”

4. **Changes in appearance** – dilated or constricted pupils, and flushing of face and neck.

“While it can be difficult to tell when someone is high on an opioid, the most common telltale physical signs include: pinpoint pupils (pupils that stay constricted even in dim room light); sudden itching of the arms, stomach or legs; drooping eyes; head nodding; seeming intensely blissful and calm; and slurred speech. When a person is going through opioid withdrawal, common signs include frequent yawning, runny nose, dilated pupils, sudden trips to the bathroom (nausea, vomiting and diarrhea), joint pain (especially in the back and legs), ‘flu-like’ feelings, severe insomnia and restlessness at night.”

5. **Increased secrecy** – coded language and/or changes in conversations with friends.

“The need for secrecy and leading a double life is a sure sign of the development of a chronic opioid addiction. Since individuals feel the need to keep their addiction hidden from friends and family, they must ‘fly under the radar,’ maintain a level of secrecy and strictly guard their privacy. I encourage families and friends to look at the whole picture, learn common slang terms for drugs, and to watch for red flags, such as an unwillingness to allow interaction between groups of friends.”

6. **Uncontrolled cravings for opioids** – using more of the opioid to get the same effect or trying to stop or cut down on use of opioids and found you were not able to.

“Over time individuals taking opioids can grow tolerant to their effects, causing them to feel a physical need, or craving, for more of the substance. Cravings can also occur when a person dependent on opioids attempts to stop or cut down on their usage and experiences the pain of withdrawal symptoms.”

If you or someone you know is dependent on opioids, you are not alone. At TurnToHelp.com you will find resources and a doctor locator to help you take the first step in seeking information about treatment.

About Dr. Carlos Tirado:

Dr. Carlos Tirado has focused his career on helping young adults as the Clinical Director of Chemical Dependency Services at Seton Shoal Creek Hospital and Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Austin. Dr. Tirado is also on the board of directors for the Sims Foundation, which helps young musicians with their opioid dependence and addiction treatment.