

## **Seven Signs & Symptoms of Opioid Dependence**

Opioid dependence, also known as opioid prescription painkiller or heroin addiction, is often stigmatized and misunderstood as a failure of the will or simply bad behavior on the part of the patient. However, opioid dependence is a real, chronic medical condition caused in part by changes in the brain's chemistry that can result from regular – often prescribed – opioid drug use. Opioid dependence can happen to *anyone* and affects men and women of all ages, races, ethnic groups and educational levels. If left untreated, it can be fatal.

The good news is that opioid dependence can be treated. Being able to spot the signs and symptoms of the condition is a crucial first step to addressing the issue.

### **1. Drowsiness and lack of energy**

During the peak effect of opioid use, a person who is under the influence of opioids can appear drowsy with drooping eyes and appear 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**

Opioids can diminish a patient's attention and concentration, interfering with learning or professional opportunities. The combined effect of cognitive impairment and the need to take drugs 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 and/or achievement.

### **3. Social behavioral changes**

The drowsiness, reduced energy and inability to concentrate that often result from frequent opioid use make it difficult for individuals using opioids to maintain normal friendships and healthy lifestyle habits, such as sports, social clubs and hobbies. Friendships and healthy “pro-social” activities may begin to drift off in favor of social isolation or changes in social groups to include friends who are engaged in similar behaviors.

### **4. Changes in appearance**

While it can be difficult to recognize when someone is under the influence of opioids, 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; flushing of the face and neck; and slurred speech. When an individual 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**

Increased and seemingly irrational secrecy can be a sign that a person is trying to hide an opioid addiction. Individuals often feel the need to keep their dependence hidden from friends and family and feel they must “fly under the radar,” maintaining a heightened level of secrecy and strictly guarding their privacy and property. Friends and family are encouraged to look at the whole picture, learn common slang terms for drugs and watch for red flags, such as an unwillingness to allow interaction between groups of friends and/or the use of coded language.

**6. Uncontrolled cravings for opioids**

Over time, individuals taking opioids can grow tolerant to their effects, causing them to experience a physical need, or craving, for the substance. It may require more of the medication to produce the same effect that a lesser dose used to create. Cravings also can occur when a person dependent on opioids attempts to stop or cut down on his or her usage and experiences the pain of withdrawal symptoms. To avoid experiencing these symptoms, many people may continue using opioids longer than prescribed, another sign of a developing addiction.

**7. Continued use of opioids despite negative consequences**

An individual experiencing opioid addiction may spend a significant amount of time and effort obtaining opioids, using them and recovering from the effects of his or her use. As a result, other areas of the individual’s life may be impacted, including social relationships, interests and professional productivity. Despite recognizing these negative changes in his or her life or having friends and family express concerns, a person living with opioid dependence may be unable to cut down or stop opioid use successfully and may continue to use opioids, even as symptoms worsen.

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