

WELLNESS INFORMATION

Alcohol

Alcohol consumption causes a number of marked changes in behavior. Even low doses significantly impair the judgment and coordination required to drive a car safely, increasing the likelihood that the driver will be involved in an accident. Low to moderate doses of alcohol also increase the incidence of a variety of aggressive acts, including spousal and child abuse. Moderate to high doses of alcohol cause marked impairments in higher mental functions, severely altering a person's ability to learn and remember information. Very high doses cause respiratory depression and death. If combined with other depressants of the central nervous system, much lower doses of alcohol will produce the effects just described. Repeated use of alcohol can lead to dependence. Sudden cessation of alcohol intake is likely to produce withdrawal symptoms, including severe anxiety, tremors, hallucinations, and convulsions. Alcohol withdrawal can be life threatening. Long-term consumption of large quantities of alcohol, particularly when combined with poor nutrition, can also lead to permanent damage to vital organs such as the brain and liver. Alcohol abuse accounts for about 100,000 deaths annually. Alcoholism is a chronic and potentially fatal disease typified by physical dependency on alcohol, a need for increasing amounts, and organ pathology. It is known to contribute to the development of fatal disorders, including cardiomyopathy (abnormalities of the heart muscle), hypertensive disease, pneumonia, and some cancers. Alcoholism is also responsible for chronic brain damage and alcohol-related brain injury is second only to Alzheimer's disease as a known cause of mental deterioration in adults. There are some findings suggesting that the more a woman drinks, the greater her chances are for developing breast cancer. Mothers who drink alcohol during pregnancy may give birth to infants with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. These infants have irreversible physical abnormalities and mental retardation. In addition, research indicates that children of alcoholic parents are at greater risk of becoming alcoholics than are other youngsters.

Drugs

Amphetamines

Amphetamines produce an artificial stress in the body, similar to that of the "flight or fight" response. Abuse of amphetamines causes over activity, irritability, defective reasoning and judgment, irregular heartbeat, liver damage, paranoia, and possible cerebral hemorrhage. There is also the possibility of a psychotic breakdown. When a user discontinues the use of the drug, severe depression, fatigue, increased appetite, and high fluid intake can result.

Barbiturates

Barbiturates are downers which depress all excitable nerve tissue, especially that of the brain and spinal cord. Barbiturates reduce the time spent in REM sleep and depress respiration. With high doses, one can fall asleep and then stop breathing. The user of barbiturates becomes sedated, sluggish in thought and action, and possibly free from worries. Barbiturates inhibit dreaming and induce the liver to make more enzymes.

Cocaine

Cocaine use is one of the biggest social and health problems in this country. Surveys show that 5,000 Americans each day try cocaine for the first time and four to six million Americans are compulsive users. Once considered a harmless drug, the risks associated with cocaine have become increasingly clear. Health risks linked to cocaine use include the following:

1. Regular users of cocaine are often restless, irritable, depressed and anxious. Higher doses and chronic abuse often lead to paranoia attacks. In many cases, there is a break with reality that includes auditory, visual, or tactile hallucinations. One hallucination is known as "coke bugs" where a person has the sensation of insects crawling under the skin. Cocaine psychosis can continue for months, and severe cases can require hospitalization. Use of cocaine may cause nasal congestion and a runny nose. Sores on the nasal membranes can also occur, along with sore throat and hoarseness. Cocaine users can experience shortness of breath, cold sweating, and tremors. Long term use can also damage the liver.
2. Neural damage due to cocaine use is highly likely. The acute hypertension occasionally brought on by cocaine use can burst weakened blood vessels.
3. Heavy cocaine use can cause one to suffer from an irregular heartbeat. Pre-existing coronary heart disease may become worse and heart attack can be caused.
4. Cocaine use can bring on high blood pressure and can cause a blood vessel in the brain to rupture which may lead to stroke.
5. Eye doctors have noticed small crystals in the retinas of cocaine users. This may be the reason that chronic users occasionally suffer from "snow lights" or flashes of light in the periphery vision.
6. Since cocaine suppresses the appetite, many users suffer from malnutrition and lose weight. Immune defenses can be lowered, making the user susceptible to tuberculosis, fungal disease, and other infections.

7. Intravenous cocaine users risk AIDS, hepatitis, and other infections and free-base smokers risk lung damage.
8. Cocaine overdose can result in paralysis of the respiratory muscles, abnormal heart rhythms, and repeated convulsions. Sudden death from cocaine use is unpredictable, and can occur in a person who has used only a small amount of the drug.
9. Cocaine use by pregnant women can cause eye and bone defects in their unborn children. Using cocaine can also cause premature and stillbirth. During the baby's first days of life, a baby born to a cocaine using mother is often irritable and jittery. Cocaine can also be transferred to a baby through breast milk.

Hallucinogens

Hallucinogens are chemicals which produce changes in perception, thought and mood. They make people see and hear things that are not there. LSD, a hallucinogen, produces visual and auditory hallucinations so intense as to mimic a psychotic state. LSD causes dilated pupils, flushed face, chilliness, and a rise in body temperature, increase in heart rate, goose bumps, salivation, and perspiration. LSD is known for producing flashbacks weeks or months after the last dose was taken. Because the consequences of LSD abuse include bizarre behavior and disorientation, there is also a significant risk of accidental injury and death. PCP, another hallucinogen, causes many users to feel tremendous anger. They may inflict violence upon themselves or others. PCP can induce a psychotic state exactly like schizophrenia. The effects of PCP can last up to a month. In severe cases, the user can have convulsions, go into a coma, and die.

Marijuana

While the harmful effects of marijuana are less obvious than those of cocaine and PCP because overdose is not common, these health effects have been reported: short-term memory impairment; impaired lung function, similar to that found in cigarette smokers; decreased sperm count and sperm mobility; interference with ovulation; impaired immune response; possible adverse effects on heart functions; and by-products remaining in body fat for weeks, with unknown consequences.

Methamphetamine

Methamphetamine is an addictive stimulant drug that strongly activates certain systems in the brain. Methamphetamine releases high levels of the neurotransmitter dopamine, which stimulates brain cells, enhancing mood and body movement. It appears to have a neurotoxic effect, damaging brain cells that contain dopamine as well as serotonin. Methamphetamine causes increased heart rate and blood pressure and can cause irreversible damage to blood vessels in the brain, producing strokes. Other effects include respiratory problems, irregular heartbeat and extreme anorexia. Its use can result in cardiovascular collapse and death.