

ISSUE BRIEF #1

Defining Alcohol and Drug Addiction

Right now more than 23 million Americans suffer from alcohol and drug addiction and need treatment; sadly, only one in 10 of them (2.4 million) gets the treatment they need.ⁱ

Addiction meets all three of the medically-defined criteria that are used to classify an entity as a diseaseⁱⁱ:

- Addiction has recognized causal agents;
- Addiction has an identifiable group of signs and symptoms; and
- Addiction causes changes in the body.

Addiction's causal agent is obvious: a drug or alcohol, a specific substance that has an effect on the processes of one's brain. The symptoms of addiction range from use despite known adverse consequences (such as health problems, losing a job or deteriorating family situations), to an inability to cut down or stop use due to withdrawal. The consistent changes to one's body caused by continued use of a substance because of addiction have been widely proven through brain scans and other medical tests.ⁱⁱⁱ

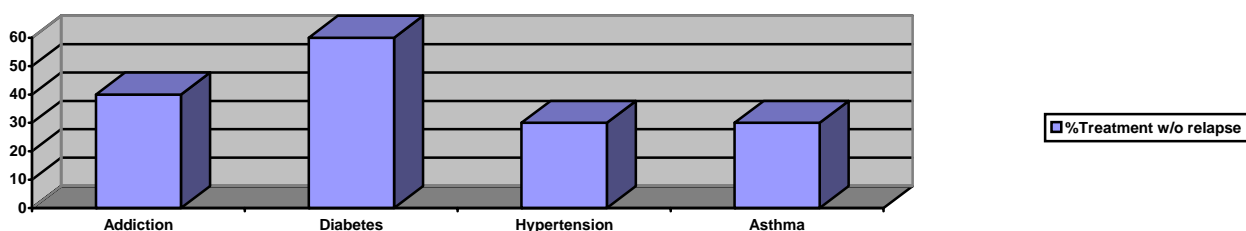
Genetics also play a significant role in determining who may face an increased risk of suffering from addiction. Studies have found that siblings of addicted individuals face a higher risk of addiction. Biological children of addicted parents have increased odds of developing addiction than those with parents who are not addicted, even when those children were raised by adoptive parents. And studies comparing identical twins raised together with those raised apart show both types share a similar danger of becoming addicted.^{iv}

Although addiction is a chronic disease, it can be treated successfully.^v The medical community has found that, just as is the case with many other chronic diseases, genetics and environment both play roles in addiction. And just like other diseases, addiction is treatable.

Chronic diseases require treatment throughout an affected person's life. Whether the disease is alcohol or drug addiction, diabetes, asthma, or hypertension, a patient's success in treatment depends on a number of factors including adherence to the prescribed: ongoing treatment program, medication schedule, and/or behavioral changes.^{vi}

As is the case with other chronic diseases, some who suffer from drug and alcohol addiction relapse. But treatment for addiction can be as successful as treatment for other chronic conditions and many people are treated without relapse.

Successful Treatment without Relapse (McLellan et al., 2000)



If left untreated, addiction is a disease that kills. More than 20 percent of the deaths in America every year are addiction-related.^{vii}

Of those deaths:

- 20,000 people die each year from illegal drug-related deaths.
- 100,000 people die each year from alcohol-related deaths.

Addiction impacts people of every socioeconomic status, gender and race, although some groups are more susceptible than others. Men are twice as likely to suffer from addiction as women (12.5 percent of men and 5.7 percent of women suffer from addiction). Rates among various racial and ethnic groups follow: Asians (4.7 percent); American Indians or Alaska Natives (13.4 percent); persons reporting two or more races (10.8 percent); Native Hawaiians or Other Pacific Islanders (9.9 percent); whites (9.4 percent); blacks (8.5 percent); and Hispanics (8.3 percent).^{viii}

ⁱ 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings, Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Office of Applied Studies (OAS), <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/nsduh/2k7nsduh/2k7Results.cfm#Ch7>

ⁱⁱ Stedman's Medical Dictionary, <http://www.stedmans.com/section.cfm/45>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Schwartz, Robert MD, "Drug Addiction: A Chronic Disease?" presented to Open Society Institute, December 12, 2008.

^{iv} Schwartz, Robert MD, "Drug Addiction: A Chronic Disease?" presented to Open Society Institute, December 12, 2008.

^v McLellan *et al.*, "Drug dependence, a chronic medical illness: Implications for treatment," JAMA; Oct 4, 2000; 284, 13; ProQuest Medical Library, pg. 1689.

^{vi} McLellan *et al.*, "Drug dependence, a chronic medical illness: Implications for treatment," JAMA; Oct 4, 2000; 284, 13; ProQuest Medical Library, pg. 1689.

^{vii} Health Affairs, 2005; Congressional Quarterly Researcher, February 9, 2007.

^{viii} 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings, Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Office of Applied Studies (OAS), <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/nsduh/2k7nsduh/2k7Results.cfm#Ch7>