



Substance Abuse Costs & Problems

Drug and alcohol abuse in America has increased due to the lingering stressors of last year. Substance abuse continues to affect every level of our society. Businesses, families, communities, and individuals are adversely impacted by the use of legal and illegal substances.

Alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use cost the United States in excess of \$610 billion annually in healthcare expenses, criminal activity, reduced productivity and lost wages, and these costs continue to rise.

In addition to the economic burden, prolonged use of drugs and alcohol results in numerous serious health conditions for individuals. People of all ages are at risk for overdose, accidental injury, and attempted suicide.

More First-Time Users

Experimentation with drugs and alcohol usually begins in adolescence, but the stress of 2020 resulted in people of all ages initiating first-time use.

Older adults who have begun trying addictive drugs represent a growing and extremely vulnerable group. The physiological changes that occur as a part of the natural aging process result in an increased use of multiple medications, drug and alcohol sensitivity, and the likelihood of co-occurring health conditions; thus, the risk for and consequences of substance use disorders are magnified.

COVID-19 Consequences

We are just now beginning to see the outcome of widespread drug and alcohol abuse in 2020, and most of the harmful consequences will not be realized for many years to come. This is true because while some substances can result in significant immediate consequences that are both acute and chronic (like alcohol), the negative impact of others (such as tobacco) are primarily observed only after prolonged use.

The mortality rate of addicts has already begun to increase, and because premature mortality is a function of substance abuse and lifestyle, the death rate due to accidental poisoning and overdose is expected to rise. COVID-19 was in effect the "earthquake in the ocean" and the spread of substance abuse and related problems is the tsunami.

Adding to the problem is the escalation in the number of relapses to drug and alcohol use, and the reduction of those who would normally have stopped using in 2020. While many adults "mature out" of heavy drinking and illicit drug use every year, that did not occur in the year of COVID-19.

Substance Abuse-Related Issues

Some of the physical and mental health conditions and other problems associated with a nationwide proliferation of substance abuse are increases in:

- Accidental Injuries
- Automobile Accidents
- Physical/Sexual Abuse Cases

- Poisoning/Overdose Deaths
- Sexually Transmitted Diseases
- Respiratory Problems
- Pain-Related Diagnoses
- Suicidal Ideation/Behaviors
- Internalizing Disorders
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Conduct Disorders/Criminal Activity
- Cancers
- Heart Disease
- Fetal Damage
- Liver Damage/Disease

Substance abuse remains an area of great concern in America due to all of the hazardous short- and long-term consequences of one of the most difficult years in our nation's history.

Accidents, Violence, and Suicide

The leading causes of death among America's youth; automobile accidents and suicide are precipitated by substance abuse. It is well known that underage drinking and drug use by teens contribute to increased risk for injury and violence. When young people witnessed adults dealing with the stress of 2020 by turning to

substance abuse and aggressive public conduct, they got the message that this type of reactive behavior is acceptable, and youth drug use increased.

Many Americans, young and old, are suffering from PTSD-like anxiety as a result of all the stressors of 2020. It was truly a year of traumatic events, and the relationship between trauma and substance abuse is bidirectional.

An Appropriate Response

Heavy drug and alcohol use makes it more difficult to deal with stressful events, and conversely, those who have experienced a traumatic event often cope with the symptoms (e.g., insomnia, hyperarousal, intrusive thoughts) by using drugs and alcohol. This creates a vicious cycle that must be broken. Continued involvement in drinking, smoking, and/or using drugs exacerbates numerous problems and strains America's healthcare services. Something must be done about the widespread abuse of substances as a way of coping with the difficulties of life.

More studies must be conducted to understand how external variables like viruses, social unrest, war, economic recessions, and social media influence drug and alcohol use, perceptions of substance use, and mental and physical well-being. We all have a duty to support research that explores risk and protective factors so that we can learn how to better cope with the stress of life.