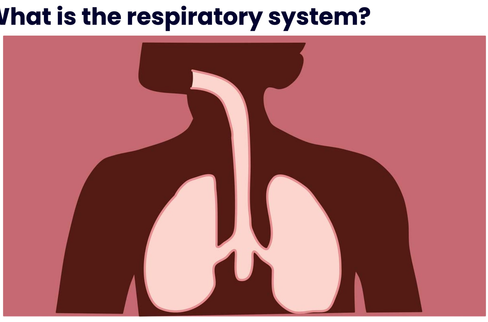
How Do Drugs And Alcohol Affect The Respiratory System?

Drug abuse affects millions of people worldwide. Addiction to drugs and alcohol has disastrous consequences for a user's mental and physical health and can be fatal. The effects of drug addiction usually extend to other areas of their life, affecting their careers, financial stability, and relationships. The specific physical effects of substance abuse depend on the nature of the drug in question. One area of the body that is often afflicted is the respiratory system. In this article we will examine the question how do drugs and alcohol affect the respiratory system?

What is the respiratory system?



The respiratory system is the series of organs responsible for our breathing. The lungs, which take in oxygen and expel carbon dioxide, are the primary respiratory organ. Other parts include the mouth, nose, throat, and larynx.

Diseases and conditions of the respiratory system are common, particularly amongst older people or those already in poor health. Respiratory disorders fall into two categories: infections and chronic disorders. They can range in severity, from minor ailments such as the common cold to more life-threatening conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

How Do Drugs And Alcohol Affect The Respiratory System?

Drug abuse has a hugely negative impact on the respiratory system. Those who frequently misuse substances are much more susceptible to respiratory disorders. Drugs can both cause these conditions and worsen the effects of existing ones. The severity of the impact will depend on the substance, the frequency and dosage, and the current health of the user.

Here is a quick rundown of how different drugs can affect the respiratory system.

Tobacco

Tobacco products such as cigarettes are one of the most commonly used drugs. The irreversible respiratory damage they cause is no secret. As foreign particles enter the body from smoking, the respiratory system effectively tries to clean itself by trapping dirt and microbes and removing them via mucus. This leads to persistent coughing. Many of these foreign particles have carcinogenic properties, changing the structure of cells, which can, over time, lead to cancer of the lungs, throat, or mouth. Smoking interferes with a user's ability to breathe and may weaken the walls of the lungs and systems within them.

Respiratory conditions associated with smoking tobacco include lung infections, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and lung cancer.

The evidence is less clear about cannabis products. Although studies are inconclusive, there is evidence to suggest that heavy smokers of cannabis have a higher risk of developing respiratory problems.

Alcohol

Chronic alcohol abuse is known for increasing the likelihood of developing certain medical conditions. Although alcohol has a minimal short term effect on respiration, extended use can damage the airways by reducing breathing rate, decreasing saliva production, and increasing the risk for bacteria in the mouth. The body is more susceptible to lung disease and infection as a result. The effects are worsened by alcohol's weakening effect on the immune system, making it harder for the body to fight off infectious diseases.

Opioids

Opioids are a type of drug generally prescribed by a doctor to relieve pain. They act as a nervous system depressant, reducing neuronal activity in the brain and spinal cord. This has a slowing effect on breathing, which can worsen existing respiratory disorders such as emphysema, asthma, and bronchitis. Opioids can lead to decreased immune system functions, which makes the body more susceptible to all kinds of diseases, respiratory or otherwise. There is a significant increase in the risk of pulmonary edema, caused by the buildup of fluid in the lungs.

Cocaine

Cocaine can have varying effects on the respiratory system, depending on how it is ingested. If snorted, it can cause significant damage to the trachea and nasal passage and increase the risk of infection in these areas. If smoked, it can lead to pulmonary edema, rupturing of the air sacs in the lungs, asthma, bronchitis, or emphysema.

Inhalants

Inhalants are products such as solvents, paint thinner, and aerosols, which can have a euphoric effect when inhaled. They are usually used by younger individuals with less risk of respiratory issues. However, chronic abuse can lead to increased risk of lung infections, pneumonia, asthma, emphysema, and bronchitis.

What to do if you are affected by substance abuse

If you are dealing with the consequences of substance abuse, you should seek help before it is too late. An addiction recovery treatment program can help you, all the way from detoxification through to rehabilitation and long term recovery.

Evolve Indy is an Indiana-based treatment center for adults recovering from addiction. It offers focused addiction recovery programs, including partial hospitalization, outpatient addiction treatment, an intensive outpatient program (IOP), and family therapy.

Get in touch now to find out more.

Facebook Twitter LinkedIn

Recommended Posts

My Friend Just Came Out Of A Drug Rehab. How Should I Treat Him?

What are the Signs of a Codependent Alcoholic?

What Are The Long Lasting Effects Of Opioid Abuse?

Is There A Genetic Component To Alcoholism?