

Physical and Mental Effects of Long-Term Addiction

Years of substance abuse have a huge impact on physical and mental health. Learn more about the effects of long-term addiction at Port St. Lucie Hospital.

Drug and alcohol abuse have the power to devastate all facets of someone's life. Those diagnosed with substance use disorder face not only deteriorating physical and mental health, but fractured social lives as well. On top of that, the longer substance use disorder goes ignored and untreated, the more dangerous its side effects grow. For this reason, it's important to learn about the effects of long-term addiction and how to stop them from progressing any further.

Physical Effects of Long-Term Addiction

Among the most tangible effects of drug and alcohol addiction are those that cause physical changes in someone's body. Depending on the type of substance used and for how long a duration, someone with an addiction may feel its impact in all of their body's systems.

Physical effects of long-term addiction can vary from minor inconveniences to potentially life-threatening risks. Be aware of how different substances affect your body and watch for the warning signs of serious concerns.

Furthermore, keep in mind that the presence of these effects does not mean it's too late to recover. It's never too late to seek treatment for substance use disorder. Port St. Lucie Hospital can help you manage even the long-term effects of drug or alcohol abuse.

Addiction and the Nervous System

In many ways, [addiction starts with the brain](#). Chronic substance use unbalances the limbic system, otherwise known as the body's reward system. The "high" produced by drugs and alcohol feels like a reward, so when it inevitably fades, the body wants to experience it again. Over time, this can end in the brain failing to recognize external, natural reward triggers. It will start to rely too heavily on continued substance use, thus feeding into the cycle of addiction.

Some drugs, such as prescription opioids, affect the brain stem as well. This can interfere with basic functions like breathing, heart rate, and sleeping. Other drugs will impact the overall nervous system by speeding it up or slowing it down, which can influence the same functions in addition to those like blood pressure and body temperature.

The cerebral cortex, or the main "thinking center" of the brain, may also feel the effects of long-term addiction. Drugs and alcohol can impair its ability to process information, resulting in brain damage that limits someone's problem-solving, decision-making, and critical thinking skills.

Addiction and the Respiratory System

Research has found that both drugs and alcohol alike have a [large impact on the respiratory system](#). Substance abuse may cause a variety of airway complications by coating or obstructing the throat. These complications can lead to further symptoms like difficulty breathing or a chronic cough.

In addition, any substance that is smoked or inhaled can deal a great amount of damage to the respiratory system. When chemicals that aren't meant to be in the lungs are inhaled, they can harm the lungs' ability to function properly.

It may lead to any of the following:

- Lung cancer
- Pulmonary edema
- Chronic bronchitis
- Pneumonia

Addiction and the Cardiovascular System

Substance use disorder places a [great strain on the heart](#) and cardiovascular system. Many drugs influence heart rate speed to either increase or decrease blood flow. When paired with foreign chemicals in the body, this can damage blood vessels as well as the heart itself.

Considering the heart is responsible for oxygen distribution throughout the body, a malfunctioning cardiovascular system can be one of the most dangerous effects of long-term addiction. Oxygen-starved tissue can undergo permanent damage such as necrosis (tissue death) and need to be amputated.

Substance abuse increases the risk of other cardiovascular complications as well, such as:

- Heart disease
- Arrhythmias (irregular heartbeat)
- High blood pressure
- Brain hemorrhages
- Blocked arteries
- Heart attacks

Addiction and the Immune System

The immune system protects individuals from becoming sick and fights off any infections that make it through. Chronic substance abuse [weakens the immune system](#) and leaves people more vulnerable to disease.

Some drugs have a direct impact on the immune system. For example, prescription opioids target immune cells. The opioid receptors on those cells grow less sensitive to the stimulation over time, which can leave them unable to activate properly in the future.

In other cases, substance use can have side effects like insomnia or dehydration. When these symptoms persist or frequently return, the immune system can suffer as a result.

Addiction and the Digestive System

Many people know of alcohol's impact on the liver. Since the liver is responsible for processing alcohol, copious amounts can strain its capabilities and eventually cause damage. In some cases, alcohol addiction can even lead to liver disease. Excessive drinking is associated with various types of cancer as well, including rectal and colon cancer.

Several other types of drugs can [damage the digestive system](#), too. They can break down the mucous membrane that lines the digestive tract, leaving it susceptible to further harm, such as in the form of stomach ulcers, as well as limiting its ability to process nutrients properly.

Addiction and the Urinary System

Another system put at risk by substance abuse is [the urinary system](#)—or, more often than not, the kidneys specifically. The kidneys, which are responsible for filtering waste in the body, are pushed to their limits by substance abuse. If they're unable to keep up, toxins can build in the body and damage additional tissue.

Most substances are capable of affecting the kidneys given enough time, but drugs such as cocaine and prescription opioids are often most associated with acute kidney failure. Cocaine in particular is known to have a devastating impact on the functionality of kidneys. It can induce rhabdomyolysis, or a breakdown of muscle tissue that releases poisonous proteins into the bloodstream. These proteins are harmful to the kidneys and can leave lasting damage.

Mental Effects of Long-Term Addiction

The many effects of drugs on the body often reach beyond someone's physical well-being. They can have just as devastating of an impact on mental health as well.

For some individuals, substance abuse can alter their brains and incite mental issues. Others turned to drugs or alcohol as a means to cope with pre-existing mental health conditions, exacerbating both in the process. In either case, the relationship between substance abuse and mental illness stands strong.

Mental effects of long-term addiction may include:

- [Depression](#)
- [Anxiety](#)
- Paranoia
- Aggression
- [Panic disorders](#)

Substance use disorder also increases the risk of [self-harm and suicide](#) in affected individuals. It can occur due to factors such as magnified depression and poor social situations, and it may also be brought on by overdoses, whether intentional or accidental.

It's common for those struggling with alcohol abuse and drug addiction to feel despondent and alone. Remember that millions of others fight addiction every day, and that help is available to those who ask for it.

Social Effects of Long-Term Addiction

Substance use disorder affects more than an individual's mind and body, even if indirectly. Because of the changes in behavior and health caused by previously discussed effects of long-term addiction, its influence can extend to someone's [social life](#) as well.

Effects of Addiction on the Community

Family. Addiction can divide families and normalize fighting, distrust, and secrecy. Children who grow up with parents who abuse drugs or alcohol are more likely to develop their own addictions as they age. Substance abuse can separate even families that were once close.

Friends. As they do with family, drugs and alcohol can push friends away as well. Friend groups may change frequently or end up consisting of people who enable dangerous behaviors. Friendships may also fade away entirely, resulting in isolation and loneliness.

Education. While education is one of the leading methods of preventing substance abuse, it is also one of the areas that suffers from it. Substances that impair someone's brain function or ability to concentrate can result in worsened performance at school.

Crime. Substance abuse increases the likelihood of crime, including theft and vehicular homicide. Furthermore, many drugs make people more volatile and aggressive, which increases the risk of emotion-driven illegal activity.

Effects of Addiction on the Economy

Work. Addiction can make it difficult to get and maintain a job. People with substance use disorder are more likely to show up late or skip, underperform, and develop strenuous relationships with coworkers.

Housing. Those living with addiction are more likely to experience homelessness or housing insecurity. Some may be evicted for their substance use, while others may be unable to pay their rent, mortgage, or utility bills.

Finances. Between the cost of substances and the issues they can cause at work and home, those with substance use disorders often struggle financially. As their addiction grows and they lose more from their life, they may spend any money they acquire on drugs or alcohol to cope.

Many of the social effects of long-term addiction feed into each other. It's difficult to preserve the stability of any of the above categories when the others start to crumble at the same time. The best way to stop the deterioration of someone's social life (or to rebuild it if it's already damaged) is to get professional help.

Addiction Treatment Program

To minimize the harsh effects of long-term addiction, it is crucial to seek treatment for substance abuse. Port St. Lucie Hospital offers numerous exceptional treatment programs that range from [dual diagnosis](#) to [medical detoxification](#).

Our staff of licensed physicians, addiction specialists, and mental health experts will work with you to develop a unique treatment plan tailored to your needs. By using evidence-based treatment options to restabilize your life and build vital coping skills, we will set and achieve goals that lead to a fulfilling life of sobriety.

Whether you have additional questions or you're ready to take back control of your life, our admissions team can help. Call us with your inquiries at [772-408-5871](tel:772-408-5871) or fill out one of our [confidential contact forms](#). We're eager to hear from you and get started on recovery together.