

abused if it is used improperly. For example, a person obsessed with losing weight may choose to use laxatives as aids but may harm himself or herself in the process. Health-care professionals may see patients who show signs of substance abuse, including tremors (shaking), poor judgment, or slurred speech. Because these signs can also reflect disease states, include all the facts when documenting such signs in the medical record.

Some drugs are particularly addictive. **Addiction** means being compulsively driven to take a drug, often to the exclusion of all other activities. Most patients do not start taking a drug with the thought of becoming addicted, but over time they may become dependent on the drug and crave it either psychologically or physically. For example, a patient experiencing pain after an injury may take an increasing amount of pain medication. Soon more of the drug is needed to produce the same effect because the person has developed a **tolerance** to it.

Other people become **habituated** to drugs. This means they are psychologically dependent on the drug. They may not physically need the drug but believe that they cannot live without it. For example, a patient may be prescribed an antianxiety medication to help her cope with stressful work situation, but she begins to enjoy the way the drug makes her feel. She may take more of the medication to cope with perceived anxiety. Soon she takes increasing amounts of the drug because she has developed a tolerance to it. Having the drug in her system becomes “normal.” Those who stop taking a medication suddenly may experience symptoms of **withdrawal**, such as tremors, emotional distress, and hallucinations.

It is vital to keep patients free from pain when they are in the acute stage of a disease or are recovering from surgery. However, prescribers are typically reluctant to increase dosages over the long term. If patients engage in drug-seeking behavior (i.e., requesting more medication out of proportion to physiological needs), the prescriber may reduce the amount of medication allowed and refer the patient for psychological counseling. Chronic pain is a particular challenge, especially in patients who are terminally ill (dying). These patients may experience increasing, not decreasing, pain as the disease worsens. The health-care provider may prescribe more painkillers as time goes on but must be careful not to overprescribe drugs that can injure the patient by suppressing respiration.



CRITICAL THINKING

A patient calls frequently and begs for more pain medication. The doctor and staff are frustrated by the repeated requests and attribute them to drug-seeking behavior. How would you handle this situation?

Preventing Substance Abuse

One of the best ways to mitigate behavior that may lead to tolerance or habituation is education. Frequently, patients do not understand the purpose of the medication or the reason for adhering to the ordered dose. You can help educate patients by teaching them about side effects and cautionary situations (e.g., do not take during pregnancy).

Perhaps a more difficult situation is learning that a member of your office staff is abusing substances. If a health-care provider is impaired (not fully functional mentally or physically) when caring for patients, the consequences can be deadly. The provider, under the influence of alcohol or other substances, may prescribe a wrong drug or be unable to perform minor surgery safely. An addicted staff member may steal drugs from the health-care provider’s stock, a facility’s medication cart, or even patients. Persons suffering from an addiction go to extreme lengths to obtain their drugs of choice and often lie to cover their behavior. This is the major reason that health-care professionals must be vigilant in maintaining the security of controlled substances. These substances should be locked in a cabinet with two locking doors. Only one person should have responsibility for the key, and the controlled substances should be frequently inventoried. Strict security can prevent the use of an agency’s drugs for addictive purposes.

Signs of Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is sometimes extremely difficult to detect until the abuse has become chronic. Many individuals have learned to function adequately under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol and appear normal. Not until you notice the physical changes in their appearance and the deterioration of their