

Substance Abuse

Definition: Substance abuse, also known as **drug abuse**, refers to a maladaptive patterned use of a substance (drug) in which the user consumes the substance in amounts or with methods not condoned by medical professionals.

Substance abuse/drug abuse is not limited to mood-altering or psycho-active drugs, it also includes alcohol and pharmaceuticals.

The term "drug abuse" does not exclude dependency, but is otherwise used in a similar manner in nonmedical contexts. The terms have a huge range of definitions related to taking a psychoactive drug or performance enhancing drug for a non-therapeutic or non-medical effects.

Use and abuse of substances such as cigarettes, alcohol, and illegal drugs may begin in childhood or the teen years.

For the purpose of this Month's Peer Education topic we will focus on two very common substance abuse instances in Swaziland: Alcoholism and Dagga

Alcoholism

Alcoholism can be defined as an addiction to the consumption of alcoholic liquor or the mental illness and compulsive behaviour resulting from alcohol dependency.

Swaziland is rated 29th out of 185 countries across the world with high rates of alcohol consumption, as stated in the latest World Health Organization (WHO) Global Status Report on Alcohol. The report further states that the unrecorded alcohol consumption in the country is estimated to be 4.1 litres pure alcohol per capita for population older than 15 years.

Alcoholism is a problem in Swaziland and it has implications both on the individual affecting their health, employment, mental state and relationships and on the wider social environment through increased incidences of traffic accidents, abuse and added strain on the health system, among others.

The Standard Measure of Alcohol

A standard drink is any drink that contains 0.6 ounces (14.0 grams or 1.2 tablespoons) of pure alcohol. Generally, this amount of pure alcohol is found in

- 355 ml regular beer or wine cooler
- 150ml of wine
- 45ml of 80-proof distilled spirits or liquor (e.g., gin, rum, vodka, whiskey).

Definitions of Patterns of Drinking Alcohol

Binge drinking

For women, 4 or more drinks during a single occasion.

For men, 5 or more drinks during a single occasion.

Heavy drinking

For women, more than 1 drink per day on average.

For men, more than 2 drinks per day on average

Excessive drinking includes heavy drinking, binge drinking or both. Most people who binge drink are not alcoholics or alcohol dependent.

“According to Dietary Guidelines, if you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation, which is defined as no more than 1 drink per day for women and no more than 2 drinks per day for men”

However, there are some persons who should not drink any alcohol, including those who are

- Pregnant or trying to become pregnant.
- Taking prescription or over-the-counter medications that may cause harmful reactions when mixed with alcohol.
- Suffering from a medical condition that may be worsened by alcohol.
- Driving, planning to drive, or participating in other activities requiring skill, coordination, and alertness.

Immediate Health Risks

Excessive alcohol use has immediate effects that increase the risk of many harmful health conditions. These immediate effects are most often the result of binge drinking and include the following:

- Unintentional injuries, including traffic injuries, falls, drowning, burns, and unintentional firearm injuries.
- Violence, including intimate partner violence and child maltreatment.
- Risky sexual behaviors, including unprotected sex, sex with multiple partners, and increased risk of sexual assault. These behaviors can result in unintended pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.
- Miscarriage and stillbirth among pregnant women, and a combination of physical and mental birth defects among children that last throughout life.
- Alcohol poisoning, a medical emergency that results from high blood alcohol levels that suppress the central nervous system and can cause loss of consciousness, low blood pressure and body temperature, coma, respiratory depression, or death.

Long-Term Health Risks

- Over time, excessive alcohol use can lead to the development of chronic diseases, neurological impairments and social problems.
- Neurological problems, including dementia, stroke and neuropathy

- Cardiovascular problems, including myocardial infarction, cardiomyopathy, atrial fibrillation and hypertension
- Psychiatric problems, including depression, anxiety, and suicide
- Social problems, including unemployment, lost productivity, and family problems
- Cancer of the mouth, throat, esophagus, liver, colon, and breast. In general, the risk of cancer increases with increasing amounts of alcohol.
- Liver diseases, including
 - Alcoholic hepatitis
 - Cirrhosis, which is among the 15 leading causes of all deaths in the United States
 - Among persons with Hepatitis C virus, worsening of liver function and interference with medications used to treat this condition
 - Other gastrointestinal problems, including pancreatitis and gastritis

Dagga

What is Dagga

It is made from the dried flowers and leaves of a plant called Cannabis Sativa. Also known as Grass, boom, joint, zol, dope, skyf, weed, hash, majat (a low grade dagga), poison, peperskyf, ganja, Swazi Gold, Malawi Gold, mabange, insangu, imya, lebake, splif, Transkei Colly, Durban poison etc.

Dagga can look like dried herbs or tea. Sometimes it contains seeds or twigs. It can be grey, green or brown in color and is usually smoked in hand-rolled cigarettes called joints or in water pipes called bong. Sometimes it is mixed with food, such as cakes and cookies, and eaten.

It is probably the only mind-altering substance (except alcohol) which is in fairly widespread use in the Swaziland population as a whole and also commands a certain social acceptability. Its medicinal properties are widely acknowledged, but these still need to be confirmed in clinical trials.

What is THC?

THC (tetra hydro cannabinol) is the chemical in cannabis which makes you feel high. This means you experience a change in mood and may see or feel things in a different way. Some parts of the plant contain a higher level of THC. For example, the flowers or buds have more THC than the stems or leaves.

Dagga is either smoked or ingested. It is often mixed into dough and baked or used as tea leaves. This infusion is then drunk. Many users roll their own cigarettes, sometimes mixed with normal tobacco. It can also be smoked in a pipe.

How does THC affect you?

When Dagga is smoked, THC goes quickly into the blood through the lungs. It then goes to the brain and this is when the high is felt. This can happen within a few minutes and can last up to five hours from each time the smoke is inhaled.

When dagga is eaten, THC is absorbed more slowly into the blood as it has to pass through the stomach and intestine. Not only does it take longer to experience the high when the drug is used in this way, the effects can also last for much longer, particularly those that are regarded as unpleasant by the user, such as hallucinogenic effects.

THC is absorbed quickly into body fat. It is then released very slowly back into the blood. It can take up to one month for a single dose of THC to fully leave the body.

Immediate Effects

Small amounts

If you have a small amount of cannabis, the effects can last up to five hours from each exposure. You may:

- feel unusually well and happy or hungry or drowsy
- do or say things which you normally wouldn't, such as risk-taking behaviour
- experience anxiety and paranoia
- have bad balance and coordination
- have problems remembering things, concentrating
- experience asthmatic symptoms or have trouble breathing if you smoke cannabis
- have a faster heart rate
- have dry, red eyes

Large amounts

If you take a large amount of cannabis, you may:

- feel confused, restless, anxious or panicky
- vomit
- experience change in your perception of time, sound, sight, touch and distance
- feel excited
- see or hear things which are not there (hallucinations)
- feel distant or separate from reality.

Long-term effects

If you take cannabis regularly over a long period of time then you may experience the following health problems:

- dependence
- increased risk of getting bronchitis, lung cancer and other diseases of the respiratory system
- decreased motivation
- decreased concentration, memory and ability to learn new things
- decreased sex drive
- depression
- weight gain or loss
- psychological effects - this is more likely if the person already has a schizophrenic condition or has a pre-disposition to schizophrenia which can be triggered by cannabis use.

A nurse at the National Psychiatric Hospital (in Swaziland) agrees with this last point, stating that there are many cases of Psychosis at the hospital. Psychosis is a combination of alcohol and dagga abuse. "A majority of our patients drink and they admit it,"

Dependence

Physical and psychological dependency on cannabis can develop. This means that you may experience withdrawal symptoms if you stop or suddenly cut down as well as tolerance, meaning you need more of the drug to experience the same effects.

Cannabis withdrawal symptoms usually consist of flu-like symptoms such as: headaches, nausea, irritation, depression, anxiety and poor appetite.

Pregnancy

It is not wise to use any drugs during pregnancy. THC passes from the mother to the baby through the placenta. There is some evidence that women who smoke cannabis may give birth to smaller babies or have premature deliveries. Other studies show that newborn babies may have trouble sleeping if their mother used cannabis during pregnancy. Also, in the first six months of life, babies who have been exposed to cannabis in-utero are at a greater risk of developing asthma, chest infections and other breathing problems such as wheezing

Substance Abuse Symptoms and Signs

Friends and family may be among the first to recognize the signs of substance abuse. Early recognition increases chances for successful treatment. Signs to watch for include the following:

- Giving up past activities such as sports, homework, or hanging out with new friends
- Declining grades
- Aggressiveness and irritability
- Significant change in mood or behaviour
- Forgetfulness
- Disappearing money or valuables
- Feeling rundown, hopeless, depressed, or even suicidal
- Sounding selfish and not caring about others
- Avoiding friends or family in order to get drunk or high
- Frequent hangovers
- Suspension or other problems at school or in the workplace for an alcohol- or drug-related incident
- Having "blackouts," forgetting what he or she did the night before
- Use of room deodorizers and incense

When to Seek Help

When to Seek Medical Care

If you recognize you have a substance abuse problem and want to quit, a doctor can refer you to community resources where you may receive formal diagnosis and treatment of a substance abuse problem. Speak to your doctor if you recognize any of the following symptoms:

- Mild tremors or an alcohol withdrawal seizure not accompanied by hallucinations or confusion
- Increasing abdominal girth
- Cough that won't go away
- Continuing feelings of sadness or depression
- Fever
- Chest pain, rapid heartbeat, difficulty breathing
- Difficulty speaking, numbness, weakness, severe headache, trouble keeping balance

Treatment

Alcoholism

While alcoholism is a treatable disease, a cure is yet unavailable. This means that even if an alcoholic has been sober for a long while and has regained health, he/she remains susceptible to relapse and must continue to avoid all alcoholic beverages.

"Cutting down" on drinking does not work - cutting OUT alcohol is necessary for successful recovery. However, even individuals who are determined to stay sober may suffer one or several "slips" or relapses before achieving long term sobriety. Relapses are very common and do not mean that a person has failed or cannot eventually recover from alcoholism. Also bear in mind that every day that a recovering alcoholic has stayed sober prior to a relapse is extremely valuable time, both to the individual and to his/her family. If a relapse occurs, it is very important to try to stop drinking once again and to get whatever additional support is needed to abstain from drinking.

Virtually all treatment programs for alcoholism include meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which describes itself as a "worldwide fellowship of men and women who help each other to stay sober." While AA is generally recognized as an effective mutual help program for recovering alcoholics, not everyone responds to AA's style and message. Even those who are helped by AA usually find that AA works best in combination with other elements of treatment, including counselling and medical care. In Mbabane there is a weekly AA meeting.

Dagga

The question is what can be done to help people become and remain abstinent. For those who cannot remain abstinent, an initial goal is measurable improvement. The first step for clinicians is to help the patient become motivated to change his relationship to drugs.

Treatment programs focus on counselling and group support systems. Another model for treatment involves one-on-one intervention, followed by an assessment session that provides an overview to the patient, an in-depth discussion about the patient's use of marijuana and reasons for favouring or opposing quitting and answers to questions the client has about quitting or modifying use.

For more information contact

Council on Smoking, Alcohol and Drugs (COSAD) Office at 7619 8946

For Counselling and Treatment

National Psychiatric Centre, Two Sticks, Manzini at 2505 5170.

Information Sourced in May 2012 from:

<http://www.emedicinehealth.com/substanceabuse>

<http://www.alcoholism.about.com/cs/drugs>

<http://www.infoshopswaziland.com>

<http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/factsheets/drugandalcohol/marijuana.html>

http://www.health24.com/medical/Focus_centres/777-2268-4463-4492,13029.asp

<http://www.kznhealth.gov.za/townhill/dagga.htm>