

Facts about Schizophrenia and Substance Abuse and Nicotine Addiction

Some people who abuse drugs show symptoms similar to those of schizophrenia, and people with schizophrenia may be mistaken for people who are high on drugs. While most researchers do not believe that substance abuse causes schizophrenia, people who have schizophrenia abuse alcohol and/or drugs more often than the general population.

Substance abuse can reduce the effectiveness of treatment for schizophrenia. Stimulants (such as amphetamines or cocaine), PCP, and marijuana may make the symptoms of schizophrenia worse, and substance abuse also makes it more likely that patients will not follow their treatment plan.

The most common form of substance abuse in people with schizophrenia is an addiction to nicotine. People with schizophrenia are addicted to nicotine at three times the rate of the general population (75–90 percent vs. 25–30 percent).

Research has revealed that the relationship between smoking and schizophrenia is complex. People with schizophrenia seem to be driven to smoke, and researchers are exploring whether there is a biological basis for this need. In addition to its known health hazards, several studies have found that smoking interferes with the action of antipsychotic drugs. People with schizophrenia who smoke may need higher doses of their medication.

Quitting smoking may be especially difficult for people with schizophrenia since nicotine withdrawal may cause their psychotic symptoms to temporarily get worse. Smoking cessation strategies that include nicotine replacement methods may be better tolerated. Doctors who treat people with schizophrenia should carefully monitor their patient's response to antipsychotic medication if the patient decides to either start or stop smoking.

If you or a family member is experiencing a mental health or an alcohol or other drug-related emergency, seek immediate assistance by calling the 24-hour Suicide Prevention, Mental Health Crisis, Information and Referral Hotline: (216) 623-6888 or the United Way's First Call for Help, 211 or (216) 436-2000.