

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

A SLIPPERY SLOPE & SILENT EPIDEMIC

Identify Signs, Lend a Hand

How To Prevent Peer Pressure

- Self-awareness:** Understanding personal triggers and vulnerabilities
- Assertiveness skill:** Building confidence to resist peer pressure
- Positive peer networks:** Surrounding oneself with supportive individuals
- Mental health support:** Seeking help when stressed or overwhelmed
- Parental guidance:** Encouraging open communication at home
- Critical thinking:** Promoting informed decision-making

Early Signs Of Drug Abuse

- Behavioural changes:** Withdrawal from family or friends | Neglecting responsibilities | Unexplained financial problems
- Physical changes:** Bloodshot eyes or sudden weight changes | Decline in personal hygiene
- Emotional shifts:** Mood swings, irritability, or sudden euphoria | Depression or lack of motivation
- Sleep disturbances:** Insomnia or oversleeping

Treatment Overview

- Reducing cravings:** Medication or behavioural therapies
- Addressing mental health:** Tackling underlying psychological issues
- Motivation and support:** Encouraging abstinence and providing outpatient care
- Relapse prevention:** Regular monitoring and interventions

FAMILY IMPACT AND SUPPORT

- Emotional support:** Counselling and therapy for family members
- Awareness:** Educating families on addiction and treatment options
- Healthy boundaries:** Setting clear limits with affected individuals
- Self-care:** Encouraging family members to prioritise well-being

FOLLOW-UP TREATMENT

- One year follow-up even when the person claims to have stopped substance use
- Relapse prevention intervention to seal off factors that predispose a person to substance use



EXPRESS ILLUSTRATION

Internet Addiction Same As Substance Abuse

- Online time consumes time for meaningful interaction, play
- Results in decline in mental or intellectual state, and vulnerable to addictive behaviour
- Brain changes due to internet addiction are the same or worse than substance abuse



Helpline: Tele-MANAS helpline for mental distress

Dial 14416

health experts are increasingly concerned about—the role of peer pressure and the ease at which young people are exposed to drugs.

Dr Jitha G, specialist of psychiatry & behavioural medicine, KIMSHEALTH, Thiruvananthapuram, said children are easily influenced by peer pressure. “The brain of a child is less developed. So they do not think like adults. The chances of substance abuse in children are easy. I have seen children as young as eight-years-old using drugs. But substance abuse is the tip of the iceberg because there are so many underlying risk factors,” she said. According to health experts, constant awareness helps children stay away from substance abuse. It has helped children from using alcohol and cigarettes, but they generally lack the awareness that the use of drugs can damage the brain.

However, they added that ad hoc awareness classes are useless without interventional strategies, as peer group promotion, movies, and general promotions glorifying drug use often undo such efforts. Some patients come up with online reports of the advantages of cannabis, they said. When there is propaganda to initiate youth into drug use, health activists feel that it is important to empower the youth to say no and the need to develop a social fraternity that says it is not good. It is a fact that the longer a person uses drugs the more difficult it becomes to get cured. But it is also important not to stigmatise the people looking for a cure and get out of the habit.

“Getting initiated to a substance is a normal thing in today’s world. Everyone has human vulnerabilities. But temptation or pressure is something that needs to be prevented,” said Dr John.

The impact of drug addiction is not confined to the individual. It penetrates into every corner of their life, disrupting relationships, causing financial instability, and leaving deep scars on family members. The children of drug users are particularly vulnerable, as studies show that they are three times more likely to experience neglect or abuse.

Mental health experts are stressing on the importance of early intervention and regular follow-ups for the success of any treatment. Even after treatment, the patient is going to the same environment where he or she got the addiction. In addictive behaviours, the chance of relapse is high if they go back to the same toxic social circles. Recovery from addiction requires a sustained effort, and follow-up treatments should continue for at least a year to reduce the risk of relapse. Substance abuse does not discriminate—it affects people from all walks of life, from the most privileged to the most vulnerable.