How Addiction and Substance Abuse Affect Sleep

The 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health report that approximately [20.3 million people aged 12 or older had a substance use disorder](https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018.pdf) in the past year — 14.8 million of which had an alcohol use disorder and 8.1 million of which had an illicit drug use disorder. Preliminary research suggests that people who struggle with substance abuse are [more likely to have a sleep disorder](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2766287/).

Substance use disorders aren’t the only form of addiction, though. Each year numerous behavioral addictions take control of individuals. They may form an addiction to gambling, shopping, video games, or social media, among other activities. While these may differ from substance use disorders, each of these addictions can become debilitating.

When drugs and alcohol, shopping, or social media take priority to work, school, or your relationships, it may be time to seek help.

The Correlation Between Addiction and Sleep

Substance abuse and sleep go hand-in-hand. With each influencing the other, it can be difficult to break the cycle. While [drugs and alcohol negatively impact the sleep of active users](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6688758/), they can also affect those who have withdrawn.

Moreover, drugs and alcohol are sometimes self-prescribed for various sleep disorders.

Whether due to an addiction or not, this misconception may have drastic effects on one’s ability to get a good night’s rest.

Drugs and alcohol aren’t the only forms of addiction interfering with sleep though. Gambling, the internet, video games, and other activities can become addictive behaviors and cause a disturbance to our bodies’ natural sleep cycles.

Common Sleep Disorders Associated with Addiction

Below is a list of [common sleep disorders](https://purple.com/blog/common-sleep-disorders), any of which [may run concurrently with addiction](https://www.oatext.com/relationship-between-sleep-disturbances-and-addiction.php):

* Insomnia: Insomnia is the inability to fall asleep and stay asleep.
* Hypersomnia: Hypersomnia is excessive daytime sleepiness that is not related to an underlying disease.
* Parasomnia: Parasomnia is a catchall term for any unusual behaviors experienced while asleep, before sleep, or while waking. This could include abnormal movements, [sleep talking](https://purple.com/blog/how-to-stop-sleep-talking), or expressions of emotions, such as crying.
* Obstructive sleep apnea: Obstructive sleep apnea is when airflow is blocked during sleep and breathing temporarily stops.
* Restless legs syndrome: Restless legs syndrome is, as the name depicts it, the irresistible urge to move the legs. This condition is known to disrupt sleep as it typically occurs while lying down.

Types of Substances and their Effects on Sleep

Research suggests that the use of [drugs and alcohol can disturb our circadian rhythm](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3177010/). This may result in a lack of sleep, sleep deprivation, poor sleep, or even sleep disorders — all of which could tempt users back to drugs and alcohol.

The circadian rhythm is a natural internal process regulating the way we sleep and wake. Operating on a 24-hour cycle, it is part of our body's internal clock. While natural factors in the body produce circadian rhythms, environmental factors can also play a role. Everything from working night shifts or jet lag to light exposure and consumption can alter our body’s sleep-wake schedule. *Chronic disruption to the circadian rhythm may lead to serious health implications.*

Below we will review different types of drugs and their individual effects on sleep:

Depressants

Depressants also referred to as sedatives or downers, suppress the central nervous system and lowers neurotransmission levels. Unlike their name suggests, they do not necessarily make a person feel depressed. [Implications of depressants](https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/depressants/) include reduced concentration and coordination, and in larger doses, drowsiness, vomiting, unconsciousness, and in the worst-case scenario, death.

They can typically be drunk as a beverage, injected, inhaled, or snorted. Their exact usage varies. While consuming alcohol can just as easily become an addiction. Depressants are also commonly used as prescription medications, but any of these have the potential to be abused.

Below we will explore three types of depressants:

Alcohol:

[Alcohol produces a chemical in the brain called adenosine](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6826818/#:~:text=Alcohol%20can%20increase%20extracellular%20adenosine,levels%20in%20the%20nervous%20system.) that can trigger sleepiness. The chemical may help with falling asleep, but the effect doesn’t last long.

While alcohol may help people fall asleep faster, it [reduces REM sleep](https://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/news/20130118/alcohol-sleep). This can trick people into believing that alcohol is a sleep aid, but in reality, it is far from one. The more alcohol that is consumed, the greater the negative effect it has on sleep quality.

Cannabis:

The [classification of cannabis](https://www.healthline.com/health/is-weed-a-depressant) is not as straightforward as other drugs. While some argue it to be a sedative, others argue it to be a stimulant. Different strains have different effects on the body, causing these disagreements. Nevertheless, the [heavy use of cannabis can impact sleep quality](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2442418/) by reducing REM sleep.

Cannabis, however, can also have therapeutic effects on certain medical conditions. This drug is commonly used to [treat pain, relax muscles, and lessen tremors](https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/medical-marijuana-2018011513085), all of which could negatively impact sleep without something to counteract them.

Opiates:

Opiates can be legal or illegal. Common types of prescription opiates include oxycodone, hydrocodone, morphine, and methadone. Illegal opiates include heroin and fentanyl. Legal opiates, when taken as prescribed, can have beneficial effects on the body. [Opiates are a mainstay in the treatment of pain](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2784658/) following injuries and accidents. These drugs block pain and can create a relaxed state.

The abuse or overuse of [opiates can cause sleep disturbances](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7395935/), as well as trigger relapse. Like other substances, it is associated with a reduced ability to enter REM sleep. Heavy or frequent users more often stay in the light sleep stage.

Prescription Medications:

Lastly, sedatives can also come in the form of prescription medications. These include benzodiazepines, non-benzodiazepines sedative hypnotics, opiates, and barbiturates, among other prescription depressants. Sleep-inducing drugs such as Ambien, for instance, are sedatives. Some drugs used to treat anxiety, such as Xanax, are also sedatives.

When depressants are taken as prescribed by a doctor, they can have beneficial effects on the body and brain. The misuse of these drugs, however, can have the exact opposite effect. Taking this sort of drug to “get high” may lead to dependence, posing risks to your sleep and overall health.

Stimulants

[Stimulants can negatively impact sleep](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3441938/); they are associated with an inability to fall asleep, longer latency to sleep onset, and shorter duration of sleep. This type of drug increases activity in the brain, such as elevating alertness, mood, and awareness.

There is a broad range of stimulants, including caffeine, nicotine, cocaine, amphetamines, and prescription stimulants.

Nicotine:

Nicotine is an active ingredient in tobacco products. Smoking cigarettes, cigars, or other tobacco products are among the most well-known ways of consuming nicotine. *The drug*[*nicotine in any form can disrupt sleep*](https://www.verywellhealth.com/how-does-smoking-cigarettes-affect-sleep-3014709)*,* causing sleep fragmentation, insomnia, snoring, or sleep apnea.

Cocaine:

Cocaine acts by binding to dopamine receptors in the brain, blocking its reuptake, and then increasing the amount of the chemical that you normally have in your body. Regular cocaine use can make your brain reliant on large amounts of dopamine. A drug that is known for promoting wakefulness, like other stimulants, [cocaine reduces the REM cycle](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/1562006/) needed for a good night’s sleep.

Amphetamines:

Amphetamines are a synthetic, addictive type of stimulant that may be used legally or illegally. When prescribed, amphetamines are known for treating ADHD and narcolepsy. Similar to cocaine, [amphetamines block dopamine reuptake and stimulate the chemical’s release](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15532213/). They promote wakefulness and decrease the body’s need for sleep.

Hallucinogens

Hallucinogens are a class of drugs that cause distortions in a person’s perception of reality, or as their name suggests, hallucinations. They can be divided into two broad categories: [classic hallucinogens and dissociative drugs](https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/hallucinogens). Classic hallucinogens include LSD, peyote, and DMT. Dissociative drugs include PCP, ketamine, and salvia.

This type of drug [may at times make it difficult to sleep](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-are-the-effects-of-hallucinogens-67500), but hallucinogens do not appear to be as associated with sleep disorders as other substances are.

Types of Behavioral Addictions and Their Effects on Sleep

Behaviors can be just as addictive as substances and just as detrimental to sleep. While the word “addiction” may make you think of drugs and alcohol, various behavioral addictions exist. At the end of the day, all addictions share one thing in common: users have a dependency on them.

A few common behavioral addictions include gambling, sex, the internet (including social media), video games, shopping, plastic surgery, and food.

Below we will discuss a few of these behavioral addictions:

Gambling Addiction:

Gambling addiction is the uncontrollable urge to keep gambling despite the loss of money, time, employment, or social life. Although sleep has not yet been fully researched concerning this type of disorder, preliminary research finds that [gambling addiction decreases sleep quality](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3327130/), especially among pathological gamblers.

Internet Addiction:

The internet has become ingrained in American society so much that people have come to rely on it for work, school, calling a cab, ordering takeout, and many other common activities. But using the internet can be done in a healthy or unhealthy manner. Internet addiction is present when there is an uncontrollable urge to use the internet despite interference with your work, social life, or of course, sleep.

In one research study, [internet addiction had a negative influence on sleep quality](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jcap.12287) among adolescents.

Managing Sleep During Recovery: Tips and Advice

Insomnia is one of the most common and persistent symptoms of withdrawal from addictive substances and behaviors. Difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, nightmares, and night sweats are other possible symptoms. Achieving a proper night’s sleep during the recovery process is a difficult feat, but something that must be done.

Below are a few tips and tricks for managing sleep during recovery:

Improve Sleep Hygiene

Your sleep hygiene refers to the habits and practices you have to get a good night’s sleep. Some common sleeping problems, such as insomnia, are occasionally caused by poor sleep hygiene. Establishing healthy sleeping pre-bedtime habits is the best start to managing sleep during recovery.

A few ways to improve sleep hygiene include setting a sleep schedule, following a nightly routine, maintaining healthy daily habits, and optimizing your bedroom. Healthy daily habits may mean fixing your diet, limiting caffeine, and regulating when you exercise. Optimizing your bedroom may mean having a [comfortable mattress](https://purple.com/mattresses), [pillows](https://purple.com/pillows), and [bedding build for your body type](https://purple.com/mattress-types). Getting [a mattress with the right dimensions](https://purple.com/mattress-sizes-dimensions) is also key to comfort.

Learning about [different sleeping positions](https://purple.com/best-sleeping-position), such as [side-sleeping](https://purple.com/the-side-sleepers-guide-to-sleeping) and sleeping on your stomach, can also help you get your sleep schedule under control. Certain sleep positions are better than others. Some positions promote better breathing and prevent back pain. Other positions may hinder breathing and cause soreness the following day.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Treatments

[Cognitive behavioral therapy](https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/patients-and-families/cognitive-behavioral) is a psycho-social intervention used to treat a variety of problems, such as those surrounding sleep and addiction. This therapy keens in on ways of thinking learned patterns, and habitual behaviors, and then provides guidance on coping with, understanding, and restructuring those barriers.

Below is a list of [cognitive behavioral therapies for sleep](https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/insomnia/in-depth/insomnia-treatment/art-20046677) to discuss with your doctor:

* Sleep restriction therapy: Sleep restriction therapy involves resetting your sleep schedule by restricting how often you’re in bed.
  + For example: if you want to get eight hours of sleep per night but are only getting four, you would restrict the amount of time you're in bed to four hours, plus 30 minutes. Once you spend the majority of your time in bed asleep then you gradually increase how much time you spend in bed.
* Sleep compression therapy: Sleep compression therapy is essentially just the opposite of sleep restriction therapy. It involves gradually reducing time spent in bed until it reaches the amount of time you’re sleeping.
* Stimulus control therapy: Stimulus control therapy involves restructuring your bedroom to be a haven for sleep. This means eliminating objects that may make it more difficult to fall asleep, such as phones, television, or food.
* Relaxation training: Relaxation training focuses on the techniques you can do to steady your breathing, relax your muscles, and ease racing thoughts. It encompasses breath work, progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, biofeedback, and meditation, among other relaxation techniques.

A common component behind each of these treatments is homework. For any treatment to work, practice is needed. Completing homework given by your doctor or psychologist is crucial to managing sleep while in recovery.

Holistic Sleep Aids

When healthy sleep habits and practices aren’t enough to get a full night’s rest, holistic sleep aids may help. Holistic sleep aids range from a proper diet and exercise to melatonin and chamomile. Any of these activities or supplements may help get to sleep and stay asleep. You may find a combination that works best.

Some natural sleep aids include:

* Acupuncture;
* Massage therapy;
* Regular exercise;
* Melatonin;
* Chamomile;
* Dietary changes.