

Addiction & Athletes

• **What is addiction?**

• The American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) defines addiction as a "treatable, chronic medical disease involving complex interactions among brain circuits, genetics, the environment, and an individual's life experiences". The ASAM goes on to state that "people with addiction use substances or engage in behaviors that become compulsive and often continue despite harmful consequences".

• **But I'm in high school, this doesn't really apply to me...**

- Unfortunately, everyone is susceptible to addiction, including people of all ages and all backgrounds all over the world.
- In the United States, we are currently experiencing an epidemic of opioid misuse as well as large amounts of stimulant use (ex: methamphetamine), alcohol use, and marijuana use.
- In Pennsylvania specifically, heroin and fentanyl use is exceptionally present. When compared to the rest of the country, Pennsylvania has a high rate of deaths from overdoses involving opioids (such as heroin and fentanyl).
- Additionally, in high school and college-aged individuals, the rates of vaping nicotine and marijuana are rapidly increasing. For this age group specifically, both nicotine and marijuana are particularly harmful.

• **But I thought vaping was harmless...**

- The truth is that vaping nicotine or marijuana is undeniably dangerous. By vaping, you're exposing yourself to the risk of serious lung damage, changes in your brain chemistry and structure, and other potential harms which can become permanent. Recent studies suggest that even 1-2 uses of marijuana during adolescence can change the structure of the brain. In fact, our brains don't even finish developing until our mid 20s.
- Unfortunately, there seems to be a notion in our society that there is little risk of harm in vaping. There has even been rapid increases in the vaping of THC products, THC being the psychedelic chemical found in marijuana. While at first it may seem "cool to experiment" or "have fun with friends", the reality is that these products have the potential to cause significant harm too. For example, recent research suggests that the higher the concentration of THC in a product, the higher the risk of psychosis (which usually involves hallucinations, changes in the way we think, changes in the way we perceive reality, etc.).

• **But I'm an athlete, I wouldn't get addicted to drugs...**

- Although being an athlete comes with many benefits, athletes are also exposed to situations that put them at risk for addiction. For instance, with higher injury rates compared to non-athletes, and subsequent required surgeries, athletes are exposed to more opioid pain medications. In addition, athletes experience an innate pressure to perform and sometimes can inappropriately decide to use opioids with the hope to play pain-free or return to play faster than they should after an injury. Moreover, athletes are often invited to parties and social events where they can be exposed to drugs and alcohol.
- It is also important to remember that as athletes, sports play a key role in your life. As such, sports injuries can often impact your social life, emotional wellbeing, and general day-to-day structure. Sometimes when athletes have injuries, it can lead to feelings of depression and loss (friends, identity, etc.), ultimately heightening the chance for you to misuse drugs.
- The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have shown that an increasing number of opioid users are/were athletes. To combat this trend, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has published a toolkit to protect and support athletes called "Substance Abuse Prevention and Intervention: An Athletics Tool Kit".

• **What are some signs that I may be suffering from an addiction?** *(adopted from the DSM-5)*

- You are taking a substance in larger amounts or for longer durations than you are meant to
- You find yourself unable to stop or reduce the amount of a substance you are taking
- You find yourself spending a lot of time getting, using, and/or recovering from a substance
- You feel various cravings/urges to use a substance and an inability to focus/perform without it
- You feel symptoms of withdrawal when you haven't had a substance
- You continue to use a substance even when you know it is harmful to your health, performance, or relationships
- You give in to a substance no matter what it costs you or what you have to give up

• **What are some signs to look out for that someone I know may be suffering from an addiction?**

- Major changes in their mood, personality, behavior, interaction level/type, friend groups, clothing style, etc.
- Struggling to perform academically or athletically at their previous level
- Having noticeable constricted or dilated pupils
- Falling asleep at inappropriate times or sleeping very little (or not at all)

If you, a teammate, or anyone you know is currently struggling with addiction, we encourage you to contact our WellSpan Philhaven Team at 1-800-932-0359. Clinicians are available 24/7 to offer help and resources.