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The Long Term Effects Of Opioid Abuse?

Louisville Addiction Treatment Center · February 16, 2022

Opioids are responsible for the majority of overdose deaths in the United States to date, regardless of whether they have been legally or illegally obtained. In 2019 alone, this amounted to 70% of all drug overdose deaths. Prescription drugs have been reported as the fastest rising problem related to drugs in the United States. Unfortunately, even short-term use of opioids can lead to addiction, and in the worst cases, an overdose. Addiction can occur for many reasons. For example, the length of time the opioids have been used, to the patient's personal history. It is virtually impossible to predict who is at risk and is also the most vulnerable to become addicted and dependent on drugs like opioids.

What are Opioids?

Opioid is a term used to describe a broad range of medication that is commonly prescribed by doctors to assist with pain relief, typically after surgery. These can be made synthetically in a laboratory, for example, fentanyl and methadone, or extracted from plants, such as morphine from the poppy plant seed. These drugs in particular work by traveling through the bloodstream and interacting with the opioid receptors in the cells located in the brain. When they reach the cells, the usual pain signals that are released are muffled, and in turn, reduce the perception of pain, and at the same time, increase feelings of pleasure by triggering the release of endorphins, which are feel-good neurotransmitters.

What is Opioid Abuse?

While opioids are effective at their job to treat pain, it also makes them a high risk for abuse. The feelings a person can experience with opioids, namely, feelings of pleasure can quickly lead to abuse and addiction. This is because individuals start to feel they cannot live without those feelings when the drugs wear off, which becomes irresistible and compulsive. Unfortunately, that out-of-control feeling for pleasure far outweighs the harmful consequences that drug addiction brings. Opioids are known to be highly addictive, due to the high doses of pleasure triggered in the reward center in the brain. So when the opioids start to wear off, it leaves individuals feeling like they want, and often need, to return back to the positive feelings they were experiencing before. This is the beginning of the addiction cycle, which makes opioids dangerous if they are not being managed and monitored carefully by doctors.

With prolonged use of opioids, the body's tolerance levels will begin to change. This means that the production of endorphins that the body creates will start to slow down, which means there will be a reduced release of good feelings. Not only can a person become addicted to the pleasurable feelings the opioids provide you with, but as a person's tolerance changes, an individual may be seeking an increased dose of opioids to seek the same level of pleasure. Due to the strength of opioids, doctors are unlikely to prescribe higher doses, especially with their awareness of the risks. Doctors will be following and monitoring a strict plan with the sole aim of relieving acute pain in patients. Unfortunately, patients who become addicted tend to seek additional opioids to feed their desires illegally. Opioids cannot be stopped suddenly, and need help from a doctor to taper off them safely. If an individual does become addicted, there are safe addiction treatment centers, that can assist with getting life back on track.

Long Term Effects of Opioid Abuse

Opioid abuse can lead to adverse, and long-term, side effects. There is a lot of research in this area that shows just how many different factors are impacted by drug abuse. It's not just what you see on the outside, but long-term abuse has the power to impact a person mentally, emotionally, and physically and significantly lower wellbeing and quality of life. While the short-term effects may seem insignificant at first, there is a lot going on inside a person's body that you may not be aware of. Not only is an addicted person's body craving that feel-good feeling, but a range of internal functions that impact everyday life are being affected.

In turn, this can lead to disruptions in sleep patterns, appetite, friendships, family connections, work, and much more. As a drug addiction continues, whether it is for pain management or not, more doses are required to keep the original effects first experienced, which makes it extremely dangerous and the body becomes dependent. Short-term effects are known to include nausea, constipation, slowed breathing, and drowsiness because they work by depressing the body and movements.

Here are some of the long-term effects on the body.

Bowels

Opioid use has been linked to long-term impacts on the gastrointestinal system including severe constipation, nausea, vomiting, bloating, abdominal cramping, internal bleeding, and bowel obstructions. This has led to patients being in pain, higher emergency visits, and increases in depression as these effects have impacted their quality of life.

Breathing

Recent studies have shown a link between chronic opioid use and sleep-disordered breathing, including hypoxemia, carbon dioxide retention, sleep apnea, and ataxic breathing.

Heart problems

Research has found that, across a range of different opioids, long-term use has resulted in a variety of cardiovascular system issues, such as heart failure, myocardial infarction, and cardiovascular revascularization.

Central nervous system

Opioids directly impact a person's nervous system, as they work to block the pain signals that travel between the brain and the nerve endings. The nervous system plays a role in the autonomic functions that are essential to function every day, including a person's heart rate, body temperature, blood pressure, and respiration. These functions can be altered negatively and not work as they are supposed to with opioid abuse. It will also impact the functioning and circulatry of the brain, which causes drug-seeking behaviors, or painful withdrawals.

Physical body

It has been suggested that opioid abuse impacts the nervous system, which can leave individuals feeling more nauseous, dizzy, and less alert than usual; which, unfortunately, can lead to an increased risk of falls, and therefore, fractures.

Hormones

Opioids have been found to interact with the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (which stimulates the adrenal release of cortisol, the body's main stress hormone) and cause hyperfunctioning and decreased functioning in the hypothalamic-pituitary-gonadal axis (a key function in many physiological processes such as regulating development, aging, and reproduction). Opioids have been shown to impact a variety of hormones and cause a range of issues, such as sexual dysfunction, androgen deficiency, infertility, decreased levels of testosterone, and fatigue.

Immune system

Preliminary research has suggested that specific opioids, namely, morphine and fentanyl, are immunosuppressants. It has also been suggested that opioid abuse has led to an increase in pneumonia in elderly patients.

Mental health

Studies have shown an increase in the use of mental health services from those who suffer from opioid abuse. Mental health can be impacted in a variety of ways, from the mental components that make up addiction in the brain to the hormones that are hyper or underactive due to the drugs to an overall decrease in quality of life as a result of addiction. For example, a person is more isolated as they lose their friends due to their addiction. Opioid users have been shown to have higher rates of depression and anxiety.

Death

Unfortunately, long-term use of opioids increases a person's risk of death. This can be due to some of the factors mentioned above, such as breathing difficulties, which are exacerbated over time. Prolonged use can also lead to an increased risk of overdose, which accounts for 30% of the deaths related to opioids.

Opioids can be effective in relieving acute pain when prescribed and carefully managed by a doctor. Due diligence and extreme caution must be taken with opioids, due to their high risk in abuse rates.

What do you do if you, or someone you know, suffers from opioid addiction?

Opioid addiction is not a pleasant experience but is not the end of the road. With professional help and support, you or your loved one will be able to overcome the addiction and live a healthy life. It is important that any individual seeking support understands that the process is not a quick fix, nor can you stop suddenly. There needs to be an intervention style that best suits you as a person and your current situation. This may mean you can have telehealth sessions over the phone, or admit yourself to an intensive outpatient treatment center.

Addiction must first be accepted by the individual, who is ready and willing to seek help in order for it to be effective. Support should be taken as a long-term approach, to ensure it is sustainable and the patient is able to make the necessary changes in order to live a life independent of drugs and improve overall wellbeing and quality of life.

There are a wide variety of treatment options available to suit your individual needs, and some insurance carriers are even able to cover the costs of treatments. It is important that the individual finds support that is free of judgment and takes a compassionate approach to support them through the process. Many treatment centers are community-focused and use evidence-based therapies such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) which have been proven to help individuals battle drug abuse.

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