

## MEDICATION-ASSISTED TREATMENT FOR ADDICTION

Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) is a form of pharmacotherapy and refers to any treatment for a substance use disorder that includes a pharmacologic intervention as part of a comprehensive substance abuse treatment plan with an ultimate goal of patient recovery. Particularly in the case of opioid addictions, patients find it hard to remain engaged in treatment because the withdrawal symptoms and the cravings are so strong; using medications to help relieve the withdrawal symptoms and deter the cravings helps patients remain engaged in detoxification and primary counseling.

### What is addiction?

Addiction is defined as a chronic, relapsing brain disease that is characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences. It is considered a brain disease because drugs change the brain - they change its structure and how it works. These brain changes can be long lasting, and can lead to the harmful behaviors seen in people who abuse drugs. (NIDA – Science of Addiction)

### How can medications help treat drug addiction?

According to the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA), different types of medications may be useful at different stages of treatment to help a patient stop abusing alcohol and/or other drugs, stay in treatment, and avoid relapse.

- **Treating Withdrawal.** When patients first stop abusing alcohol and/or other drugs, they can experience a variety of physical and emotional symptoms, including pain, depression, anxiety, and other mood disorders; restlessness; and sleeplessness. Certain treatment medications are designed to reduce these symptoms, which makes it easier to stop the abuse.
- **Staying in Treatment.** Some treatment medications are used to help the brain adapt gradually to the absence of the abused drug. These medications act slowly to stave off drug cravings and have a calming effect on body systems. They can help patients focus on counseling and other psychotherapies related to their treatment.
- **Preventing Relapse.** Science has taught us that stress, cues linked to the drug experience (e.g., people, places, things, moods), and exposure to alcohol and/or other drugs are the most common triggers for relapse. Medications are being developed to interfere with these triggers to help patients sustain recovery.

As part of a comprehensive treatment program, MAT has been shown to:

- **Improve survival**
- **Increase retention in treatment**
- **Decrease alcohol and other drug use**
- **Decrease hepatitis and HIV infections**
- **Decrease criminal activities**
- **Increase employment**
- **Improve birth outcomes for patients**

(Center for Substance Abuse Treatment)

### Stages of MAT

Medication-Assisted Treatment uses a staged approach.

- During the *introduction* stage the goals are to eliminate withdrawal symptoms and achieve steady medication levels.
- The goal of the *stabilization* stage is to eliminate the patient's drug-seeking behavior, craving, use and abuse.
- During the *maintenance* stage, the goal is for the patient to resume normal function while continuing to receive regular dosages of the medication without the need for routine dosage adjustments.

## Medications Used to Treat Drug Addiction

### Tobacco Addiction

- **Nicotine replacement therapies** (Nicorette, NicoDerm, Commit) (e.g., patch, inhaler, gum)
- **Bupropion** (Zyban, Wellbutrin) - Reduces the severity of nicotine cravings and withdrawal symptoms.
- **Varenicline** (Chantix) - Blocks the pleasant effects of nicotine (from smoking) on the brain.

### Opioid Addiction

- **Methadone** - The most frequently used medication for opioid addiction treatment. Methadone works as a substitute for opiate drugs of abuse by producing similar effects and preventing withdrawal symptoms in people who have stopped using these drugs. Has been shown to be effective when used with appropriate safeguards and psycho-social services.
- **Buprenorphine** (Subutex) - May be used for medical maintenance pharmacotherapy and for medically supervised withdrawal. It is similar to other opioids, but creates a less euphoric high. Physicians must receive SAMHSA certification to provide buprenorphine.
- **Buprenorphine-Naloxone Combination** (Suboxone) - Buprenorphine creates a lesser high and naloxone blocks the effects of the opioid.

### Alcohol and Other Drug Addiction

- **Naltrexone** (ReVia, Depade) - Helps prevent relapse to alcohol and heroin abuse. It works by decreasing the craving for alcohol and blocking the effects of opioid medications and opioid street drugs
  - **Naltrexone for Extended Release Injectable Suspension** (Vivitrol)
- **Disulfiram** (Antabuse) - Helps prevent relapse to alcohol abuse. Discourages drinking by causing unpleasant effects when even small amounts of alcohol are consumed.
- **Acamprosate** (Campral) - Acamprosate works by helping the brains of people who have consumed large amounts of alcohol to work normally again. Acamprosate does not prevent the withdrawal symptoms that people may experience when they stop drinking alcohol.

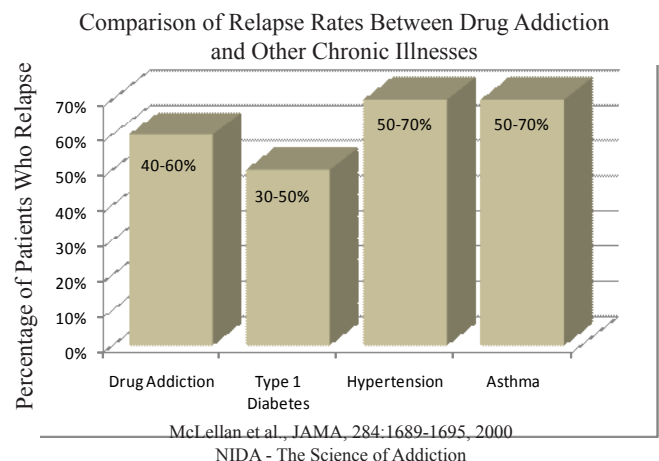
## Treatment Works...People Recover

**Can addiction be treated successfully?** Yes. Addictions are treatable diseases.

**Can addiction be cured?** Addiction need not be a life sentence. Like other chronic diseases, addiction can be managed successfully. Treatment enables people to counteract addiction's powerful disruptive effects on brain and behavior and regain control of their lives.

### **Does relapse mean treatment has failed?**

No. The chronic nature of the disease means that relapsing to alcohol and/or other drug abuse is possible. Relapse rates are similar to those for other well-characterized chronic medical illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, and asthma, which also have both physiological and behavioral components. Treatment of chronic diseases involves changing deeply imbedded behaviors, and relapse does not mean treatment failure.



**Sources:** Center for Substance Abuse Treatment  
National Institutes of Health - Medline Plus

National Institute of Drug Abuse - The Science of Drug Abuse and Addiction  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration