

Tip Sheet:

Drug Misuse During Cancer Treatment

Drugs are chemicals that affect how your brain works. When used properly, they can treat medical conditions and help you feel better. Drug abuse involves taking illegal street drugs, prescription drugs, or over-the-counter drugs in a way that can harm you.

For patients with cancer, taking illegal drugs or misusing prescribed or over-the-counter drugs can put your health at risk and keep you from getting the full benefit of your treatment.

Abused drugs include: marijuana, cocaine, LSD, and heroin; club drugs such as Ecstasy (MDMA); methamphetamine; prescription opioids (medications used to treat pain such as Fentanyl); benzodiazepines (medications used to treat anxiety such as Xanax); and alcohol, tobacco, and over-the-counter cold/cough medicines.

These drugs can alter your thinking, mood, and judgment. They can cause health problems and hurt your relationships. They can also lead to addiction – a disease in which you have trouble quitting and may not be in control of your life. Drug addiction is a medical condition that can be treated. It is not a sign of weakness.

Tell your care team

We encourage you to talk honestly with your Dana-Farber care team if drug use is, or has been, a problem in your life. This may be difficult, but your team needs to know so they can give you the best possible care. They can refer you to services such as detoxification to manage withdrawal symptoms, or medication for treating drug addiction.

Can misusing drugs interfere with my cancer treatment?

Yes. Here are some ways:

- It may impair your judgment and make it harder for you to follow your cancer treatment properly.
- It may affect important relationships with your family, friends, and Dana-Farber care team. For example, your doctor may not feel comfortable prescribing pain medicine if you lose his/her trust by not being honest about your substance use.
- Drugs such as heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine may increase your risk of a bloodstream infection if you are injecting drugs. This can be serious for patients with weakened immune systems – such as those on chemotherapy – because their bodies are less able to fight infection.
- Smoking or inhaling a drug carries a risk of lung damage. Smoking a plant-based substance like marijuana also carries a risk of fungal infection, which can be dangerous for patients with weakened immune systems.
- Using illegal drugs is associated with heart and cardiovascular problems, including increased heart rate and blood pressure and heart attacks. This is particularly worrisome if you are receiving cancer treatments that can damage the heart and cardiovascular system, like radiation therapy and certain chemotherapy.

Anxiety and cancer

Facing cancer can make people feel anxious and afraid. Patients with a history of drug addiction may worry that a cancer diagnosis will lead them back to illegal drugs as a way to lessen their anxiety. We encourage you to discuss this with your care team.

Helping families

Drug use can cause stress within families. For example, relatives may believe a family member has an addiction problem while he/she disagrees. Dana-Farber social workers, psychiatrists, and other counselors can help patients and families discuss these issues and refer them to outside services when needed. Tell your cancer care team if you'd like to speak with a counselor.

Opioids

Opioid medications are commonly used to treat cancer pain that is moderate to severe. Your doctor may prescribe an opioid such as hydrocodone, methadone, oxycodone, or morphine to lessen your symptoms. Your team will work with you to provide safe and effective pain control, with as few side effects as possible.

Opioids can become addictive. If you have a history of drug addiction, you may be especially worried about taking opioids to manage cancer pain. It's important to talk openly with your care team about your past and present drug use. If you or a family member are concerned about opioid use, see DanaFarber's patient materials on "What to Know When Taking an Opioid."

Marijuana

Marijuana, a drug derived from the cannabis plant, can alter your mood and thinking, weaken coordination, cause throat and lung problems, and become addictive. On the other hand, marijuana contains chemicals, called cannabinoids, that may help patients manage certain cancer-related symptoms and side effects, such as pain, nausea and vomiting, weight loss, sleep problems, and anxiety.

While marijuana remains illegal in the United States, Massachusetts and many other states have legalized it for cancer patients. But more scientific evidence is needed that it is effective. Using marijuana can interfere with your cancer treatment and should be considered carefully. We encourage you to tell your Dana-Farber caregivers if you plan to use marijuana. For more, see our patient materials on "Medical Marijuana Use During Cancer Treatment."

For more information

To access the internet during your visits to Dana-Farber, consider using one of the free computer workstations in the Blum Patient and Family Resource Center, or borrow an iPad from the Shapiro Center for Patients and Families. Both centers are on the first floor of the Yawkey Center.

This document is for informational purposes only. The content is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.