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## Addictive Behaviors and ADHD

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Managing ADHD well is a challenging process. It becomes more difficult when a co-existing chemical or behavioral addiction is part of the picture. Many adults with ADHD struggle with addictive behaviors, which are often unrecognized and untreated.

There is no direct genetic link between [addictive behaviors and ADHD](#). Addictive disorders are complex and often caused by behavioral, emotional, and life factors. Thrill-seeking behavior, the need for immediate gratification, and a search for novel pleasure-seeking experiences are more common for many people with ADHD. Life stressors, such as job loss and financial difficulties, are more frequent with [ADHD](#), and are also risk factors for substance use and other addictive behaviors.

Initially, addictive behaviors provide a jolt of dopamine that is very satisfying for the brain's reward circuitry. Over time, the "thrill" wears off, but the addictive behavior continues due to physical or emotional cravings. Some indicators of addiction are:

- **Strong and urgent cravings** for the substance or behavior. These might include physical cravings (alcohol, cocaine) or emotional cravings (gambling), or both.
- **No control** over consumption. This is why one drink leads to seven, and 30 minutes of video games turns into five hours (or an entire night).
- **Continued use despite negative consequences.** Sometimes this involves denial (“I don’t have a drinking problem”), but many individuals are aware of the problems caused by their addictive behaviors and continue them anyway.
- **Inability to stop** the behaviors despite the desire to do so. When this is the case, it is time to see a counselor who specializes in working with people with addictions.

Below are some common chemical, behavioral, and food addictions. These are potential problems for everyone, but their risks are heightened for [adults with ADHD](#).

## Addictive Behaviors with Chemicals

The lifetime occurrence of substance use problems among adults in the general population is approximately 25 percent. They may be addicted to alcohol, recreational drugs, or prescription medications. In comparison, 50 percent of adults with ADHD have a history of dealing with substance use at some point in their lives.

Many reasons account for addictions among adults with ADHD, however two general causes come up again and again. First, adults with ADHD are more likely to self-medicate, particularly so when they lack awareness or understanding of their ADHD biology and have not yet learned how to manage it well. Second, many adults with ADHD are drawn to thrill-seeking and novel experiences. One individual said he liked to “play with” his brain.

### Stimulants and the ADHD Brain

[Many adults with ADHD](#) self-medicate with large amounts of caffeine on a daily basis. Some self-medicate with nicotine via cigarette smoking or vaping. Other stimulants that are abused include cocaine, crystal meth, MDMA (ecstasy), and ephedrine. All of these pose serious health risks (including caffeine in large amounts), and some lead to fatal consequences. The temporary “benefits” of these drugs are limited, and are far outweighed by their serious risks to health and life.

Prescribed [stimulant medications](#), when used properly and taken as prescribed, are more effective and safer than the drugs discussed above. If you're going to medicate yourself, do it right and do it safely. To be used safely, the medications must only be taken orally and in prescribed doses.

### **Alcohol and the ADHD Brain**

When used in moderation, alcohol can enhance life experiences, such as dining and social interactions. When used in excess, it becomes highly addictive. Alcohol addiction is considered to be as severe as heroin addiction. Alcohol is often the self-medicating drug of choice for individuals experiencing symptoms of [depression](#) or [anxiety](#).

### **Marijuana and the ADHD Brain**

[Marijuana](#) is approaching a level of social acceptance to rival that of alcohol. It is used by many people to promote a sense of calmness and relaxation. There are many different strains of marijuana that produce different effects for different people. Some adults with ADHD who are hyperactive believe that it helps tone down their hyperactivity. Some just enjoy the pleasant "high" that they get from the drug. Marijuana, for many people, falls into the "play with my brain" category.

Adults with ADHD who consider using marijuana should be aware that regular use can have a negative impact on attention, memory functioning, and activation difficulty. In other words, regular marijuana use could potentially exacerbate problems associated with distractibility, forgetfulness, as well as procrastination.

### **Opiates and the ADHD Brain**

Opiate drugs include heroin, morphine, and codeine. In the past several years, the abuse of opioid prescription medications (e.g., Vicodin, OxyContin, Percocet), commonly prescribed as pain relievers, has become a national epidemic, resulting in thousands of deaths. These are highly addictive drugs and deadly when abused. They cause more than twice the number of deaths by overdosing than does heroin.

### **Sedatives and Tranquilizers**

Prescription sedatives and tranquilizers act as central nervous system depressants. Their effect on the brain is basically the opposite of that caused by stimulant medications. They are commonly prescribed for anxiety, tension, and sleep disorders. Some people with ADHD take them to help their problems with falling

asleep and staying asleep. When the medications are prescribed as sleep aids, continued long-term use can lead to addiction.

## **Hallucinogens**

The hallucinogens include LSD, mescaline, psilocybin (“magic mushrooms”), PCP, and DMT. These are powerful, mind-altering drugs that can produce hallucinations, severe mood alterations, and changes in reality perception.

## **Behavioral Addictions and ADHD**

Behavioral addictions get less attention than chemical addictions. However, like all addictions, they can cause severe problems in people’s lives. They should be taken seriously, and, when necessary, treated professionally.

### **Internet Addictions**

The Internet is designed to be distracting and addictive. It gives immediate gratification. There is an endless variety of entertainment, information, and social connections. “Hello, there,” says the [ADHD brain](#), “where have you been all my life?”

Internet addictions include excessive use of online media, including social media, message boards, and innumerable websites. But most people will say, you just described modern life! Actually, no. What makes an addiction is excessive use. If time spent on the Internet makes you fail to get work done, or ignore or hurt the people you love, then it must be acknowledged that you have a problem with the Internet.

### **Gambling Addictions**

Gambling addictions are among the most powerful and destructive behaviors. Whether this involves sports gambling, casino gambling, or other forms of gambling, they cause disruptions in people’s lives. Financial and relationship problems follow in their wake.

### **Shopping Addictions**

For many people, with or without ADHD, shopping provides instant gratification and a temporary mood boost. People with ADHD are at high risk for overspending and for [shopping addictions](#) for two major reasons: People who are naturally impulsive

are impulsive shoppers. And not keeping track of finances makes it easy to lose track of how much money a person is spending.

## Sexual Addictions

By definition, a sexual addiction involves a loss of control over one's sexual behavior. For some people this involves having "serial affairs," whether or not the person is engaged in a committed relationship. For some it involves soliciting sexual partners online, or making use of prostitutes. The most common form of sexual addiction is [porn addiction](#).

## Addictive Behaviors with Food

Food addictions are considered to be both physical and behavioral addictions. They are so common that many people regard them as regular eating habits. Unfortunately, the foods that are most addictive are the foods that are the most unhealthy. A steady diet of them not only increases risk for obesity and physical illnesses, such as diabetes, but also wreaks havoc with mood regulation and cognitive functioning as blood sugar levels take a roller-coaster ride.

Highly processed foods, such as cookies and cakes, are addictive for the same reason that addictive drugs are addictive: They deliver a high dose (in this case, of [sugar](#)) and have a rapid rate of absorption. That "sugar high" you feel after a bowl of ice cream is an actual high. That "carbohydrate craving" you feel for a bag of chips is a real craving for carbs. Strong cravings are a symptom of addiction.

When does eating become a [food addiction](#)? Important factors to consider are:

- When having a cup of ice cream leads to eating the whole pint, there may be a problem. As there might be with eating half of a large pizza, the entire bag of chips, and so on.
- When a person is significantly overweight (a BMI over 30 is considered obese), or having health problems, such as hypertension or diabetes, but cannot stop eating, there is a problem.
- Making an effort to change unhealthy behavior, and being unable to do it by yourself, is a primary defining characteristic of addictive behavior.

*From the book, [Life with ADHD](#) by [Peter Jaksa, Ph.D.](#) A clinical psychologist in Chicago, Illinois, Peter has worked extensively with adults and children diagnosed with ADHD for the past 35 years. He serves on ADDitude's [Scientific Advisory Board](#).*

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## About The Author

Peter Jaksa, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist with over 30 years' experience working with children, adolescents, and adults with ADHD. Dr. Jaksa is the author of numerous articles and columns about ADHD, including articles published in **ADDitude Magazine**, **Attention Magazine**, **Organize Magazine**, and **FOCUS**. He has provided interviews to national publications and news organizations including the **Wall Street Journal**, **CNN**, **U.S. News & World Report**, **Chicago Tribune**, and **Men's Health Magazine**. He has presented at national conferences to health care professionals, educators, and the general public. Dr. Jaksa is a contributing writer for **ADDitude Magazine** and a member of the Scientific Advisory Board. He is the author of *Life With ADHD* and co-author of *Real People, Real ADHD*.