

Substance Use Disorders

Substance abuse is on the increase in South Africa and at least 15% of South Africans are said to have a substance abuse problem according to 2016 statistics. Alcohol, marijuana (dagga), cocaine, tik and heroin are some of the most frequently used substances in this country, according to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG). How do medical schemes treat substance abuse and what is covered under PMB regulations?



According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) approximately 31 million persons suffer substance use disorders. Substance abuse is on the increase in South Africa and at least 15% of South Africans are said to have a substance abuse problem according to 2016 statistics. Alcohol, marijuana (dagga), cocaine, tik and heroin are some of the most frequently used substances in this country, according to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG).

What is substance abuse?

Substance abuse occurs when an individual develops a pattern of harmful use of any substance for mood-altering purposes. "Substances" may be legal (alcohol, prescription medication, glue, etc) or illegal (recreational drugs). Substance abuse is different from addiction. Many people with substance abuse problems can quit or change

their unhealthy behavior. Addiction, on the other hand, is a disease and an individual cannot stop using the substance even when their condition causes them harm.

What are the causes of substance use disorders?

Substance use disorders may co-occur with other mental health illnesses such as schizophrenia, panic disorders, social phobia or depression. In many cases people attempt to cope with their emotional pain, stress, loneliness or sadness through "self-medication", using alcohol, legal and / or illegal substances. This can lead to the abuse of these substances.

Other causes of substance use disorders:

- A genetic predisposition – substance use disorders often runs in families
- Environmental risk factors where children are raised in high-risk environments such as homes in which stress is high
- Trauma
- Peer pressure
- Stress management
- Boredom
- Low self esteem
- Curiosity or the desire to experiment
- Sleep problems
- Chronic pain
- Divorce or loss of a loved one

Warning signs of substance use disorders

Warning signs of substance abuse that one should look out for include:

- The use of substances to control feelings and to avoid problems
- An increased rate and need for the substance
- The continuous but unsuccessful attempts to control the use of the substance
- Experiencing severe mood swings
- Experiencing long periods of sadness or depressed mood
- A lack of interest in activities that one previously enjoyed
- Experiencing severe episodes of anger
- Thinking or talking about suicide
- Experiencing blackouts — periods of time in which drugs or alcohol prevent remembering events that took place
- Deterioration of physical appearance and personal grooming habits.
- An unexplained need for money and eventually, serious financial problems, often accompanied by borrowing and stealing

Signs and symptoms of substance use

The signs, symptoms and behaviour of substance use disorders include:

- The feeling that one must use the substance regularly, every day or even several times a day
- The intense urge for the substance that blocks out any other thoughts
- The need for more of the substance to get the same effect over time
- The need to take larger amounts of the substance over a longer period than intended
- Ensuring that one always has a supply of the substance
- The spending of money on the substance, even if one cannot afford it
- The reduction of meeting obligations, work responsibilities, social or recreational activities because of substance use
- The continuous use of the substance, even though one is aware that it is causing problems in their life and physical or psychological harm
- Performing acts to get the substance that one normally wouldn't do, such as stealing
- Engaging in risky behaviour when one is under the influence of the substance
- Spending more time to obtain, use or recover from the effects of the substance
- Failure in attempts to stop using the substance

- Experiencing of withdrawal symptoms when one attempts to stop taking the substance
- Change in one's behaviour (lying, stealing and cheating)

Diagnosis of substance use disorders

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM V) criteria to diagnose substance abuse includes:

- Taking the substance in larger amounts or for longer than one is meant to
- Wanting to cut down or stop using the substance but not managing to
- Spending a lot of time getting, using, or recovering from use of the substance
- Cravings and urges to use the substance
- Not managing to do what one should do at work, home, or school due to substance use
- Continuing to use the substance, even when it causes problems in relationships
- Giving up important social, occupational, or recreational activities because of substance use
- Using substances again and again, even when they endanger one's life
- Continuing to use the substance, even when one knows that one has a physical or psychological problem that could have been caused or made worse by the substance
- Needing more of the substance to get the effect one desires (tolerance)
- Development of withdrawal symptoms, which can be only be relieved by taking more of the substance
- The diagnosis may also include blood tests and urine tests to verify the substances that are used as well as the general health of the patient.

Treatment of substance use disorders?

- There is no cure for substance addiction, but treatment can help one to overcome an addiction and remain substance free. Treatment depends on the substance used and any related medical or mental health disorders one may have. It is important to have long-term follow-up to prevent a relapse.
- Treatment is focused on physical and psychological interventions.
- Physical treatment will include withdrawal or detoxification to help one stop taking the substance as quickly and safely as possible.
- The withdrawal from different categories of substances — such as depressants, stimulants or opioids — causes different side effects and requires different approaches. It may involve gradually reducing

the dose of the substance or temporarily substituting the substance with other medication, such as methadone, buprenorphine, or a combination of buprenorphine and naloxone.

Psychological programs usually include:

- Individual, group and/or family therapy sessions
- Sessions that focus on understanding the nature of substance abuse/addiction, becoming substance-free and preventing relapse

Behaviour or psychotherapy therapy can be done by a psychologist or psychiatrist. The therapy will focus on:

- Developing ways to cope with drug cravings
- Suggesting approaches to avoid drugs and prevent a relapse
- Proposing ways to deal with a relapse if it occurs
- Discussing issues with regards to one's job, legal problems, and relationships with family and friends
- Teaching family members better communication skills and support
- Dealing with other mental health conditions

What is included in the Prescribed Minimum Benefit (PMB) regulations?

The PMB regulations include substance abuse and the use of drugs under the following Diagnostic Treatment Pairs (DTP):

DTP Code	DTP Description	Treatment
182T	Abuse or dependence on Psychoactive substance, including alcohol	Hospital-based management up to 3 weeks/year
910T	Acute delusional mood, anxiety, personality, perception disorders and organic mental disorder caused by drugs	Hospital-based management up to 3 days
910T	Alcohol withdrawal delirium; alcohol intoxication delirium	Hospital-based management up to 3 days leading to rehabilitation
910T	Delirium: Amphetamine, Cocaine, or other psychoactive substance	Hospital-based management up to 3 days

The PMB include the diagnosis, treatment and care of the conditions whilst an individual is in hospital. In-hospital management may include medicines (e.g. withdrawal support), and consultations with other health professionals e.g. a psychologist.

The PMB regulations however do not include the out-patient treatment for substance abuse.

Although the condition is a PMB condition, it is important to remember that medical schemes can use designated service providers (DSPs). A designated service provider (DSP) is a healthcare provider (e.g. doctor, pharmacist, hospital) that is appointed by the medical scheme for the treatment or care of PMB conditions. An individual may use a non-DSP voluntarily but should be aware that when one chooses to use a non-DSP, one may have to pay a portion of the bill as a co-payment. This should be discussed and clarified with the Medical Scheme in writing, if possible, to avoid any misunderstandings.

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