

Substance Use and the Heart

Substance use, including alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs, can have many damaging effects on the heart. Protecting your heart by staying away from these substances improves heart health and overall well-being, increasing both longevity and quality of life.

Did You Know?

- Chronic heavy alcohol use can lead to hypertension (high blood pressure), arrhythmias (irregular heartbeats) and cardiomyopathy (weakened heart muscle).
- Smoking and vaping raise heart rate, increase blood pressure and contribute to plaque buildup in arteries, leading to heart disease.
- Stimulants like cocaine and meth can cause heart attacks, arrhythmias and heart failure by overloading the heart.
- Opioids, both prescription and illegal, can cause a drop in heart rate, leading to a condition called bradycardia or even cardiac arrest.
- Combining substances can have dangerous, unpredictable effects on the heart.

Signs Your Heart May be Struggling:

- Chest pain or discomfort
- Shortness of breath
- Fatigue or weakness
- Swelling in the legs, ankles or feet
- Dizziness, lightheadedness or fainting
- Irregular heartbeats or palpitations
- Nausea or indigestion
- Cold sweats or excessive sweating
- Pain in the neck, jaw, back or stomach
- Cold or clammy skin

If you or someone you know experiences any of these symptoms, especially if they come on suddenly or are severe, it's crucial to seek medical attention.

Heart Healthy Alternatives to Substance Use

EXERCISE:

Walking, jogging, swimming, cycling, yoga or even dancing

Regular physical activity strengthens the heart, improves circulation, reduces stress and boosts mood by releasing endorphins

MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION:

Guided meditation apps or practicing deep breathing exercises

Meditation and mindfulness practices can reduce stress, anxiety and depression, which are often triggers for substance use

HOBBIES AND CREATIVE OUTLETS:

Painting, playing an instrument, writing, knitting, gardening, or any activity to unwind and express yourself

Engaging in hobbies or creative activities can serve as healthy distractions from cravings and give a sense of accomplishment and joy

THERAPY AND COUNSELING:

Develop long-term tools for managing stress and coping with life's challenges

Professional therapy can help address the underlying causes of substance use, such as trauma, anxiety or depression, and equip you with healthier coping strategies

For heart health resources, check out the American Heart Association at heart.org. Individuals struggling with substance use can find support via the **Georgia Crisis and Access Line (GCAL) at 1-800-715-4225**. GCAL is available 24/7 to help connect those in need to routine and crisis services.