

What Hooks Us

Addictions in America change over time. Here's a look at what we're battling now

SUBSTANCE AND BEHAVIORAL ADDICTIONS



Alcohol

About 14.8 million people, or 5.4% of the population, are dependent on or abuse alcohol, and 13,000 more try it for the first time every day. Alcoholics Anonymous has more than 2 million members—impressive, but only a small fraction of those who need help.



Drugs

An estimated 8.1 million people are dependent on at least one drug. On average, 27,000 try them for the first time each day. Marijuana, prescription pain relievers and prescription tranquilizers are the leading drugs of abuse. In 2018, 3.7 million people received treatment for the use of drugs and/or alcohol.



Tobacco

There are about 59 million users of tobacco products in the U.S. About 15.8% of men and 12.2% of women are cigarette smokers, with cigarette use lowest in Western states and highest in the Midwest; while youth are smoking fewer cigarettes, 21% of high school students are now vaping.



Caffeine

It's the most widely used mood-altering drug in the world and is ingested by about 80% to 90% of Americans, primarily through soda and coffee. A daily brewed cup of joe, with 100 mg of caffeine, can lead to mild physical dependence. Withdrawal symptoms are experienced by about half of those trying to quit.



Food

Although food addiction is not a classifiable disorder, as many as 20% of the population may fit the criteria. Food addiction also has some overlap with binge-eating disorder (which is classified), in that it affects women much more than it does men and is linked to depression.



Gambling

Approximately 2.5 million people, or 1% of the U.S. population, have a gambling disorder, wagering heedless of the consequences. In treatment populations, about half of those with a gambling disorder have suicidal ideation, and 17% have attempted suicide.



Shopping

Research indicates that about 6% of the U.S. population are compulsive buyers, with women only slightly more likely to be affected than men. The accessibility of online shopping is thought to have fueled a worldwide surge in the wallet-draining addictive activity.



Sex

Some 3% to 6%, or 7.4 million to 14.7 million, of American adults struggle with what has recently been classified as compulsive sexual behavior disorder. Online porn addiction has escalated in recent years; excessive masturbation and other obsessive thoughts and behaviors often have a strong correlation with childhood trauma.



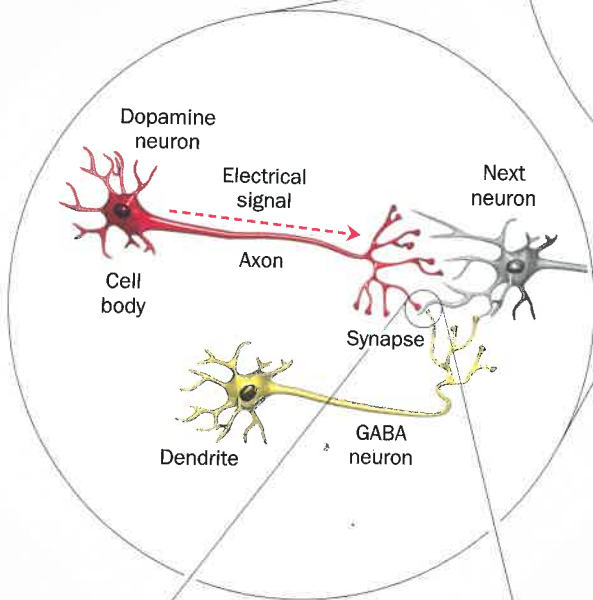
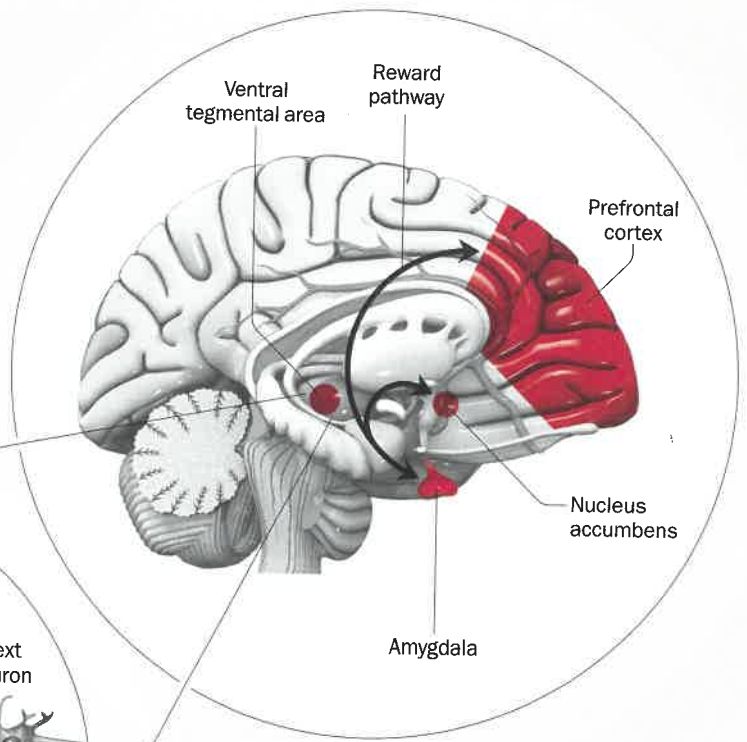
Internet

With 90% of children and teens and 65% of adults playing online and video games regularly, DSM-5 includes online gaming disorder—not as a diagnosis but a condition warranting further research. Research indicates that some heavy users develop dysfunctional symptoms that cause social, work and emotional impairment.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE BRAIN

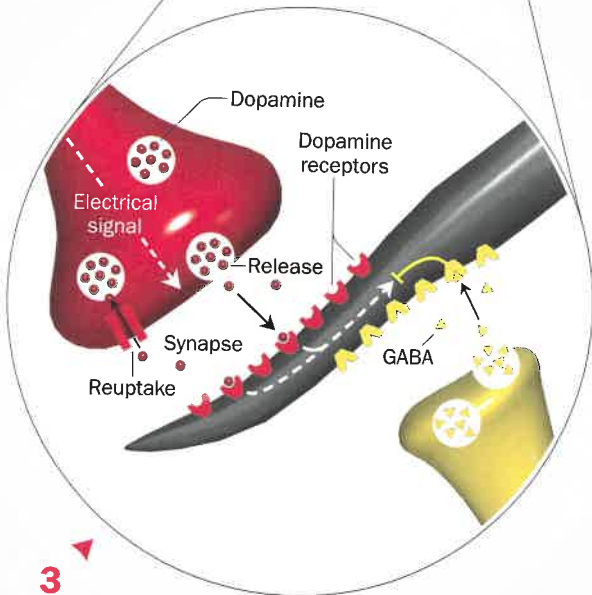
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We feel good when neurons in the reward pathway release a neurotransmitter called dopamine into the nucleus accumbens and other brain areas.



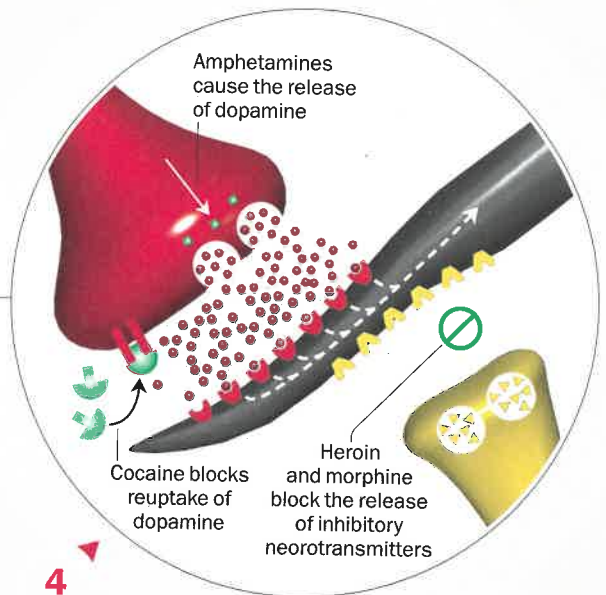
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Neurons in the reward pathway communicate by sending electrical signals down their axons. The signal is passed to the next neuron across a small gap called the synapse.



3 ▶

Dopamine is released into the synapse, crosses to the next neuron and binds to receptors, providing a jolt of pleasure. Excess dopamine is taken back up by the sending cell. Other nerve cells release GABA, an inhibitory neurotransmitter that works to prevent the receptor nerve from being overstimulated.



4 ▶

Addictive substances increase the amount of dopamine in the synapse, heightening the feeling of pleasure. Addiction occurs when repeated drug use disrupts the normal balance of brain circuits that control rewards, memory and cognition, ultimately leading to compulsive drug-taking.