



The most widely abused drug may not be what you think

April is National Alcohol Awareness Month

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If someone were to ask you what the most widely abused drug in the U.S. is, would you know the answer? With all the media coverage of the opioid crisis and the increase in overdose deaths, you might be tempted to think it is opioids.

Likewise, as many states are making medical or recreational use of marijuana legal – and with marijuana continuing to be the most widely used illegal drug in the nation – you might also be tempted to think it is marijuana.

But even as both marijuana and opioids are legal in some instances, the most widely abused drug in the U.S. is not only legal in every state, it is also widely available and advertised. Further, there is very little stigma associated with its use – which some even regard as a rite of passage – and it is relatively inexpensive.

This drug is alcohol.

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), approximately 18 million adults ages 18 and over in the United States – or about one in eight – have an alcohol use disorder, AUD (what we typically refer to as alcoholism).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that 88,000 deaths in the U.S. are caused by excessive alcohol use, making it the third most common life-style related cause of death (behind smoking and poor diet/lack of exercise). By way of comparison, that's more than twice the number of deaths from opioid overdoses (approximately 42,000 in 2016 according to the CDC).

Excessive alcohol consumption can also lead to a number of health problems, including unintentional injuries, violence, sexually transmitted infections, memory problems, chronic diseases (such as high blood pressure, stroke and liver disease) and cancers of the esophagus, liver, throat, and colon, among others.

Of course, many people can have an alcoholic drink responsibly and not encounter health or social problems associated with their alcohol use. But because alcohol is legal and socially acceptable, it can be easy to overlook problem drinking, or to rationalize excessive drinking as the result of stress or just 'wanting to have a good time' once in a while. The truth is, excessive drinking is a risk factor for alcohol dependence and other alcohol use disorders.

There are other risk factors for AUDs as well, including a family history of alcoholism, the age at which a person first drinks alcohol, or having a partner or friends that drink excessively. Some mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder, have been shown to increase the risk of an AUD, while the risk for addictive disease generally is known to be influenced by genetic factors.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism has a list of questions on its website that can help you assess whether you or a loved one might have an AUD, at:
<https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-use-disorders>.

If you visit this site, keep in mind that only a physician or trained substance abuse professional can make a clinical diagnosis of a alcohol use disorder – so if you have other questions or concerns, it’s always best to contact your doctor or local substance abuse treatment provider (Highland Rivers is one of several local agencies providing alcohol treatment and recovery services).

Finally, we know that alcohol use disorders – like any addictive disease – are not the result of bad choices and poor morals. In fact, the NIAAA defines alcohol use disorder as a “chronic relapsing brain disease.” But more important, this definition notes that “recovery is possible regardless of severity.” And these two facts are true of any addictive disease.

If alcohol is causing problems for you, remember you are not alone. But also remember that you can recover. While alcohol may continue to be the most widely abused drug in the U.S., millions of people have also recovered and live substance-free. You can too.