

The Link Between Substance Use & Suicide Risk

Substance use disorders (SUDs) can increase suicide risk, especially when paired with mental health concerns, crisis events, or isolation. Early warning signs, compassionate conversations, and timely support can help reduce risk and promote recovery.

Why the Link Matters

People who use alcohol or drugs, and especially people who meet criteria for SUD, face higher suicide risk than the general population.¹ The Pew Charitable Trusts reports that suicide risk rises substantially for people with alcohol use disorder and is even higher when alcohol, drug, and tobacco use disorders occur together.¹ Research also shows that SUD is associated not only with suicide deaths, but with serious suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts, making early screening and rapid connection to care essential.¹

Substance Use Can Increase Suicide Risk

Alcohol and other drugs can increase impulsivity, reduce inhibition, worsen judgment, and make it harder for a person to use coping strategies during a crisis.¹ Substance use may also worsen depression, anxiety, trauma symptoms, sleep problems, chronic pain, or social isolation.² At the same time, people may use substances to manage emotional distress, creating a cycle in which symptoms and substance use reinforce one another.² Co-occurring mental health conditions are common. People with mental health conditions are more likely to use substances or have SUD, and people with SUD can also experience other mental health conditions.²

Substance Use Disorders Linked to Higher Risk of Suicidal Ideation, by SUD¹

Adults in the U.S. with alcohol, opioid, cocaine/stimulant, sedative/tranquilizer, or cannabis use disorders are more likely to think seriously about suicide than those without the disorders.



Resources

Ohio Department of Behavioral Health Treatment Locator
<https://dbh.ohio.gov/get-help/find-a-provider>

RecoveryRachel: a verified provider directory with information on Ohio-licensed and certified treatment facilities
<https://recoveryrachelohio.org/>

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:
Call, text, or chat 988 for free, 24/7 confidential support

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Warning Signs

- Expressing thoughts of dying, feeling trapped, or being a burden.
- Increased substance use, particularly after a significant loss or conflict.
- Withdrawal from friends, family, and usual activities.
- Sudden mood swings, agitation, hopelessness, or severe anxiety.
- Giving away possessions, saying goodbye, or seeking ways to harm themselves.

How to Support Someone

If you are worried, ask directly and calmly: “Are you thinking about suicide?” Asking does not cause suicide; it can open the door to help.³ Listen without judgment, stay with the person if danger seems immediate, and reduce access to lethal means when it is safe to do so.³ Call or text 988, or chat at 988lifeline.org, for free, confidential, 24/7 crisis support.³ If there is imminent danger, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department.

Support should also address both suicide risk and substance use together.⁴

- Connect the person with a trusted health professional, behavioral health clinician, SUD treatment program, peer recovery specialist, or primary care team.
- Support a care plan that may include safety planning, counseling, medications for opioid or alcohol use disorder, treatment for co-occurring mental health conditions, and follow-up after a crisis.
- Reduce barriers to care by helping with practical needs such as transportation, insurance navigation, housing stability, appointment scheduling, and family or recovery support.
- Use person-first, non-stigmatizing language that reinforces SUD as a treatable medical condition and helps the person feel respected, supported, and hopeful. For example, say “a person with a substance use disorder” instead of “addict” or “substance abuser.”

Early recognition, direct conversation, compassionate support, and timely connection to crisis services and treatment can reduce risk and help people move toward safety, recovery, and hope.

References

- 1 The Pew Charitable Trusts. Substance use disorder increases risk of suicidal thoughts and attempts. Published February 11, 2025. <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2025/02/substance-use-disorder-increases-risk-of-suicidal-thoughts-and-attempts>
- 2 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Substance use & mental health. Updated May 27, 2026. <https://www.cdc.gov/mental-health/about-data/substance-use-mental-health.html>
- 3 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. 2025 National Guidelines for a Behavioral Health Coordinated System of Crisis Care. SAMHSA Publication No. PEP24-01-037. Published 2025. <https://library.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/national-guidelines-crisis-care-pep24-01-037.pdf>
- 4 American Medical Association. Care for substance use disorder guide. Updated May 8, 2024. <https://www.ama-assn.org/public-health/behavioral-health/care-substance-use-disorder-guide>

ABOUT

OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation (OSPF) educates, advocates for, and builds connections and support for individuals, families, and communities to prevent suicide.



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