

This is the first of two factsheets on definitions of commonly-used words in the drug field. This sheet outlines the more general words and the sheet in the next issue picks up on the more specialist ones. Both sheets can be used when training new staff, explaining things to the media or as a quick reference point when you're unsure on the specifics of certain terms.

Addiction implies that a drug **dependency** has developed to such an extent that it has serious detrimental effects on the user (referred to as an **addict**). They may be chronically intoxicated, have great difficulty stopping the drug use, and be determined to obtain the drug by almost any means. The term **addiction** is inextricably linked to society's reaction to the user, and so medical experts try to avoid using it, preferring **dependence** instead.

Addict is a drug user whose use causes them serious physical, social or psychological problems. As it is a much-abused term, many people prefer to talk of **problem drug users** instead. However, the term has a much more specific use in Britain: the Home Office compiles a register of addicts, a record of opiate and cocaine users who are notified to the Home Office by their doctors.

Analgesic is a pain-killer.

Benzodiazepines are the most commonly prescribed minor tranquilisers (for daytime anxiety relief) and hypnotics (to promote sleep). They include products such as Valium, temazepam and Mogadon.

Cold turkey means rapid withdrawal from drugs.

Controlled substances are drugs whose distribution is either forbidden or limited to medical channels by the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. In Britain, there are 3 classes of controlled drugs, Class A (eg, heroin, LSD, MDMA), Class B (eg, cannabis, amphetamine) and Class C (eg, benzodiazepines).

Dependence describes a compulsion to continue taking a drug in order to feel good or to avoid feeling bad. When this is done to avoid physical discomfort or **withdrawal**, it is known as physical dependence; when it has a psychological aspect (the need for stimulation or pleasure, or to escape reality) then it is known as psychological dependence.

Depressant is a drug which acts on the central nervous system to suppress neural activity in the brain. **Opioids** and **sedatives** are both classes of depressants.

Designer drugs is a term coined in the 1980s to describe drugs specifically synthesised to circumvent regulations on **controlled substances**.

Detoxification is the process by which a user withdraws from the effects of a drug. It usually refers to **withdrawal** in a safe environment (a detoxification/detox centre), such that any symptoms are minimised.

Drug use/misuse/abuse: *drug use* is an easy term to understand. *Misuse* and *abuse* are more difficult to pin down, as they are highly subjective. In general though, *misuse* can be taken to mean using drugs in a socially unacceptable way, while *abuse* means using them in a harmful way. As *abuse* is a more morally 'loaded' term, many people prefer to talk of *drug misuse* or harmful use instead.

Flashbacks are hallucinations which occur a long time after a drug (often LSD) has been used.

Hallucinogenic is a drug which induces hallucinations and alters perceptions (eg, LSD, ecstasy). [See **Psychedelic**]

Hard drugs usually refers to drugs which are seen to be 'more dangerous' (eg, heroin, crack). As this term is a value judgement, it is best avoided. [See **Soft drugs**]

Narcotics are commonly used to mean any illicit drug. However, the term technically refers to chemicals which induce stupor, coma, or insensibility to pain, such as **opiates** or **opioids**.

Opiate/opioid opiates are derived from the opium poppy (eg, morphine, codeine, heroin). **Opioids**, on the other hand, include both opiates and their synthetic analogues (eg, methadone, pethidine).

Over The Counter (OTC) drugs are those which are available from chemists without a prescription (eg, Benlyn, Neurofen).

Overdose is the use of any drug in such quantities that acute adverse physical or mental effects occur. It can be deliberate or accidental; lethal or non-lethal.

Paraphernalia is the equipment for drug-taking (eg, silver foil, spoon).

Pharmaceutical drugs are those drugs available from chemists, either on a prescription or **over the counter**.

Polydrug use is the use of more than one drug, often with the intention of enhancing or countering the effects of another drug. **Polydrug use** may however simply occur because the user's preferred drug is unavailable (or too expensive) at the time.

Prescribed drugs are those drugs obtained on a prescription. May refer to methadone and other **opioids** or to **tranquillisers** and **anti-depressants**.

Prevention means reducing the risk, firstly, of an individual engaging in drug use, and secondly, to an individual already engaged in drug use. These two aspects of prevention are usually known as demand reduction and harm reduction.

Problem drug use tends to refer to **drug use** which could be either dependent or recreational. In other words, it is not necessarily the frequency of drug use which is the primary 'problem', but the effects that drug-taking has on the user's life (ie, they may experience social, psychological, physical or legal problems as a result of their drug use).

Psychedelic was coined in 1956 by the LSD researcher Humphrey Osmond, and literally means 'soul manifesting' – an activation of consciousness. Although virtually synonymous with **hallucinogenic**, **psychedelic** implies that the drug or experience acts as a catalyst to further feelings and thoughts, and is not merely hallucinatory.

Psychoactive/psychotropic drugs: These two terms are perhaps the most all-encompassing way of describing mood altering 'drugs' in general, though they are more often used to describe LSD and similar hallucinogenic drugs.

Recreational drug use is the use of drugs for pleasure or leisure. The term is often used to denote the use of ecstasy and other 'dance drugs', and implies that drug use has become part of someone's lifestyle (even though they may only take drugs occasionally).

Rehabilitation is the process by which someone with a drug problem is brought back to an optimal state of physical, psychological and social well-being and reintegrated into the wider community. It follows the initial treatment and can be carried out in a number of ways (eg, relapse prevention, therapeutic communities).

Script means a prescription (usually for methadone).

Sedative is a **depressant** which acts on the central nervous system to relieve anxiety and induce calmness/sleep (eg, barbiturates, benzodiazepines).

Smart drugs are drugs which are supposed to increase mental performance.

Soft drugs usually refers to drugs which are seen to be 'less dangerous' (eg, cannabis). As this term is a value judgement, it is best avoided. [See **Hard drugs**]

Stimulant is a drug which acts on the central nervous system to increase neural activity in the brain (eg, amphetamine, cocaine, caffeine, and – if used in high quantities – **antidepressants** and certain **opioids**).

Tolerance refers to the way the body gets used to the repeated presence of a drug, meaning that higher doses are needed to maintain the same effect.

Tranquillisers are calming drugs used to manage various mental disorders. They can be differentiated from **sedatives** in that (unless used in high doses) they do not interfere with thought processes or send the user to sleep.

Volatile substances refers to all solvents and inhalants (not as it is sometimes thought, to aerosols only).

Withdrawal is the body's reaction to the sudden absence of a drug to which it has adapted. The effects can be stopped either by taking more of the drug, or by 'cold turkey' – which may last for up to a week.