



SITE MAP [A-Z]

Search

[Home](#) [Veteran Services](#) [Business](#) [About VA](#) [Media Room](#) [Locations](#) [Contact Us](#)

[VA](#) > [Health Care](#) > [PTSD: National Center for PTSD](#) > [Public](#) > [PTSD and Substance Abuse in Veterans](#)

PTSD: National Center for PTSD

PTSD Home

For the Public

Public Section Home

PTSD Overview

Types of Trauma

Is it PTSD?

Treatment and Coping

Other Common Problems

Family and Friends

PTSD and Communities

Paginas en Espanol

Apps, Videos and More

For Professionals

About Us

QUICK LINKS

Zip Code

Go

Health Programs

Protect Your Health

A-Z Health Topics



PTSD and Substance Abuse in Veterans

Some people try to cope with their Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms by drinking heavily, using drugs, or smoking too much. People with PTSD have more problems with drugs and alcohol both before and after getting PTSD. Also, even if someone does not have a problem with alcohol before a traumatic event, getting PTSD increases the risk that he or she will develop a drinking or drug problem.

Eventually, the overuse of these substances can develop into Substance Use Disorder (SUD), and treatment should be given for both PTSD and SUD to lead to successful recovery. The good news is that treatment of co-occurring (happening at the same time) PTSD and SUD works.

How common is co-occurring PTSD and SUD in Veterans?

Studies show that there is a strong relationship between PTSD and SUD, in both civilian and military populations, as well as for both men and women.

Specific to Veterans.

- More than 2 of 10 Veterans with PTSD also have SUD.
- War Veterans with PTSD and alcohol problems tend to be binge drinkers. Binges may be in response to bad memories of combat trauma.
- Almost 1 out of every 3 Veterans seeking treatment for SUD also has PTSD.
- The number of Veterans who smoke (nicotine) is almost double for those with PTSD (about 6 of 10) versus those without a PTSD diagnosis (3 of 10).
- In the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, about 1 in 10 returning soldiers seen in VA have a problem with alcohol or other drugs.

How can co-occurring PTSD and SUD create problems?

If someone has both PTSD and SUD, it is likely that he or she also has other health problems (such as physical pain), relationship problems (with family and/or friends), or problems in functioning (like keeping a job or staying in school). Using drugs and/or alcohol can make PTSD symptoms worse.

For example:

- PTSD may create sleep problems (trouble falling asleep or waking up during the night). You might "medicate" yourself with alcohol or drugs because you think it helps your sleep, but drugs and alcohol change the quality of your sleep and make you feel less refreshed.
- PTSD makes you feel "numb," like being cut off from others, angry and irritable, or depressed. PTSD also makes you feel like you are always "on guard." All of these feelings can get worse when you use drugs and alcohol.
- Drug and alcohol use allows you to continue the cycle of "avoidance" found in PTSD. Avoiding bad memories and dreams or people and places can actually make PTSD last longer. You cannot make as much progress in treatment if you avoid your problems.

Share this page

Share

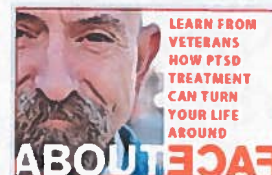
SEARCH PTSD SITE

1 Choose Section

2 Enter Term and Search

Advanced Search

GET HELP FOR PTSD



- You may drink or use drugs because it distracts you from your problems for a short time, but drugs and alcohol make it harder to concentrate, be productive, and enjoy all parts of your life.

VA has made it easier to get help. It is important to know that treatment can help and you are not alone.

What treatments are offered for co-occurring PTSD and SUD?

Evidence shows that in general people have improved PTSD and SUD symptoms when they are provided treatment that addresses both conditions. This can involve any of the following (alone or together):

- Individual or group [cognitive behavioral treatments \(CBT\)](#)
- Specific psychological treatments for PTSD, such as [Cognitive Processing Therapy \(CPT\) \(en Español\)](#) or [Prolonged Exposure \(PE\) \(en Español\)](#)
- Behavioral couples therapy with your spouse or significant other
- Medications that may help you manage the PTSD or SUD symptoms

Talk with your provider about treatment for specific symptoms like pain, anger, or sleep problems.

What should I do if I think I have co-occurring PTSD and SUD?

The first step is to talk to a health professional and ask for more information about treatment options. Each VA medical center has an SUD-PTSD Specialist trained in treating both conditions to reach the best health outcomes. If there are signals you are at risk for both disorders, you will be encouraged to talk with a provider about how to best support your recovery. There are treatment resources at every VA medical center. The VA wants you to have the best possible care for co-occurring PTSD and SUD.

- Find a [VA PTSD Program](#)
- Find a [VA SUD Program](#)

If you continue to be troubled or distracted by your experiences for more than three months or have questions about your drinking or drug use, learn more about treatment options. Life can be better! Talk to a VA or other health professional to discuss choices for getting started.

Date this content was last updated is at the bottom of the page.

[PTSD Site Map](#) | [Public Section](#) | [Professional Section](#) | [About Us: National Center for PTSD](#) | [Mobile Site](#)

The National Center for PTSD does not provide direct clinical care, individual referrals or benefits information.

For help please see:
[Where to Get Help for PTSD or Get Help with VA PTSD Care, Benefits, or Claims](#)

PTSD Information Voice Mail
 (802) 296-6300
 Contact Us: ncptsd@va.gov
 Also see [VA Mental Health](#)

Connect with us



For Web site help: [Web Policies](#)



CONNECT

Veterans Crisis Line:
 1-800-273-8255
 (Press 1)

Social Media



[Complete Directory](#)

VA HOME

- [Notices](#)
- [Privacy](#)
- [FOIA](#)
- [Regulations](#)
- [Web Policies](#)
- [No FEAR Act](#)
- [Site Index](#)
- [USA.gov](#)

QUICK LIST

- [Veterans ON-line Application](#)
- [Prescriptions](#)
- [Apply for Health Care](#)
- [My HealthVet](#)
- [eBenefits](#)
- [Life Insurance Online Applications](#)
- [VA Forms](#)
- [State and Local Resources](#)

RESOURCES

- [Careers](#)
- [Returning Service Members](#)
- [Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment](#)
- [Homeless Veterans](#)
- [Women Veterans](#)
- [Minority Veterans](#)

ADMINISTRATION

- [Veterans Health Administration](#)
- [Veterans Benefits Administration](#)
- [National Cemetery Administration](#)

[EMAIL UPDATES](#)

White House
Inspector General

Strat Plan FY 2011-2015
VA 2013 Budget Submission

Surviving Spouses and
Dependents
Adaptive Sports Program

Email Address

Signup

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs | 810 Vermont Avenue, NW Washington DC 20420
LAST UPDATED JANUARY 3, 2014