

Dependence, Tolerance and Addiction Explained

Dependence, tolerance and addiction describe different things. Knowing the difference can help you explain changes in your medicine or substance use and ask for help.

What the Words Mean

Term	What it means	How to understand it
Physical dependence	Your body has adapted to a substance. You may have withdrawal symptoms when you reduce or stop it.	This can happen even when you take medicine exactly as prescribed. Physical dependence on its own does not mean addiction.
Tolerance	Over time, the same amount has less of a particular effect.	A medicine feeling less helpful can have other causes, too. Tell your prescriber what has changed.
Addiction	You have trouble controlling substance use and keep using even when it harms your health, relationships or daily life.	A clinician looks at your pattern of use and how it affects you, along with any tolerance or withdrawal symptoms.

What to Tell Your Clinician

Start with what has been happening. What do you take, how often, and how do you feel between doses? Mention taking more than you planned or continuing to use even when it causes problems. You do not need to know the diagnosis before asking for help.

Before Changing Your Dose

If your medicine seems less helpful, ask your prescriber before increasing the dose. If you take a benzodiazepine regularly, talk with your prescriber before reducing or stopping it. Withdrawal can cause seizures and other dangerous symptoms. When it is time to stop, FDA recommends lowering the dose gradually on a schedule chosen for you. In the US, call 911 for a seizure or trouble breathing.

Notes for Your Appointment

For example, imagine someone who takes a prescribed benzodiazepine as directed and feels unwell after missing a dose. They could be physically dependent without having an addiction. A prescriber can review the symptoms and help them decide how to continue or change the medicine safely.

Keep your notes private. Write short notes, then save the PDF and reopen it to check your answers. Use another copy or separate paper if you need more room.

What you take and what has changed

List the medicine or substance, how much and when you take it, and when symptoms happen. Include the prescribed dose if it differs. Bring the container or medication list.

What is worrying you

For example, running out early, missing responsibilities, pain or anxiety returning, side effects, or worry about stopping.

What you want to ask

For example: "What could be causing this change? What should I do next?"

More Help

[Benzodiazepine tapering](https://addictionhelp.com/benzodiazepine-tapering) (addictionhelp.com)

[Find treatment help](https://addictionhelp.com/find-treatment-help) (addictionhelp.com)

Sources

NIDA: Principles of Drug Addiction Treatment, Third Edition (nida.nih.gov)

FDA: Benzodiazepine Boxed Warning and Safe Use (fda.gov)