

Addiction Terms in Plain English

Treatment conversations can include unfamiliar words. Keep this glossary nearby when you read about care or talk with a provider. You can always ask someone to explain a term and what it means for you.

Words About Addiction and Substance Use

Term	Meaning
Addiction	A treatable condition in which a person has difficulty controlling substance use or a rewarding behavior and continues despite harm.
Physical dependence	Your body has adapted to a substance. Reducing or stopping it can cause withdrawal. This can happen even when you take medicine as prescribed.
Tolerance	Over time, the same amount of a substance has less of a particular effect.
Withdrawal	Physical or mental symptoms that can happen when you reduce or stop a substance your body has adapted to.

Words About Treatment

Term	What to expect or ask
Assessment	A clinician asks about your substance use, health and daily life to help plan care. Ask who will do the assessment and how you will help choose the plan.
Outpatient	You attend appointments and leave the same day. Visits may include counseling or medication care.
Intensive outpatient (IOP)	Scheduled sessions that provide more support than routine office visits. You live outside the program.

Term	What to expect or ask
Partial hospitalization (PHP)	An intensive daytime mental health program that can be an alternative to overnight psychiatric care.
Residential	You live at the treatment program. Ask what care is available there during the day and overnight.
Inpatient	You stay overnight with care available around the clock, often in a hospital or clinic.
Telehealth	Care by video, phone or another remote connection. Ask which appointments you will need to attend in person.

Words About Treatment Programs

Term	Meaning
License	Permission from a state agency to provide certain services. The rules vary by state.
Accreditation	An outside organization has checked a program against its standards. This is separate from a state license. Check which location and services the accreditation covers.
Evidence-based treatment	Treatment supported by research. Ask which treatment the provider offers and how it could help with your concerns.

When a Word Is Unclear

“Could you explain that in everyday language? What does it mean for my treatment, costs or next appointment?”

A Word You Want Explained

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.

The word and where you heard it

Include the sentence around it if that helps you remember.

What it means for you

Write the explanation in your own words and any question you still have.

Keep Learning

[Addiction treatment options](#) (addictionhelp.com)

[Paying for rehab](#) (addictionhelp.com)

Sources

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

SAMHSA: Treatment Types for Mental Health, Drugs and Alcohol (samhsa.gov)

SAMHSA: Finding Quality Treatment (samhsa.gov)

NIAAA: 10 Questions for Alcohol Treatment Programs (alcoholtreatment.niaaa.nih.gov)

Medicare: Intensive Outpatient Program Services (medicare.gov)

Medicare: Partial Hospitalization (medicare.gov)

NIDA: Treatment and Recovery (nida.nih.gov)

Chamberlain SR, Lochner C, Stein DJ, et al. (2016). Behavioural addiction—A rising tide? European Neuropsychopharmacology. (pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)