

Addiction Terms in Plain English

Use this short glossary during an appointment or while comparing treatment. If someone uses an unfamiliar term, ask what it means for your care and what happens next.

Keep completed notes private. Use short notes in each box; continue on another copy or separate paper when needed. Save the completed PDF on your device and reopen it to check your notes before closing.

Words About Substance Use [1]

Term	Meaning
Addiction	Compulsive substance use that continues despite harmful consequences.
Physical dependence	The body adapts to a substance; reducing or stopping it can produce withdrawal. This can occur with prescribed use.
Tolerance	A particular effect becomes weaker at the same dose over time.
Withdrawal	Physical or psychological symptoms that can follow reducing or stopping a substance after the body has adapted.

Words About Treatment [2] [4] [5] [6]

Term	What to expect or ask
Assessment	A clinician gathers information about your substance use, health and circumstances to help plan care. Ask who does it and how you participate.
Outpatient	You attend appointments and leave the same day. Visits can include counseling or medication care.
Intensive outpatient (IOP)	More intensive than routine office visits, with structured sessions while you live outside the program.
Partial hospitalization (PHP)	A more intensive outpatient day program that can be an alternative to inpatient psychiatric care.

Term	What to expect or ask
Residential	You live at the treatment program. Ask which clinical and medical services are available on site and after hours.
Inpatient	Overnight treatment with around-the-clock care, often connected to a hospital or clinic.
Telehealth	Care provided remotely, such as by video or phone. Ask which visits require an in-person appointment.

Words Used When Choosing a Program [3] [4]

Term	Meaning
License	Permission from the relevant state authority to provide specified services. Requirements vary.
Accreditation	Review against an accrediting organization's standards. Check the exact program and location; it is separate from licensing.
Evidence-based treatment	A treatment supported by research. Ask which approach the provider means and how it fits your situation.

A Phrase You Can Use

"Can you explain that in everyday language? What does it change about my options, costs or next appointment?"

A Term to Clarify

Word or phrase, and where you heard it

Write the sentence around it if that would help.

Explanation in your own words

What it means for you; what still needs clarifying.

Keep Learning

Addiction treatment options

<https://www.addictionhelp.com/treatment/>

Paying for rehab

<https://www.addictionhelp.com/drug-rehab/paying-for-rehab/>

Sources

[1] NIDA: Principles of Drug Addiction Treatment, Third Edition

<https://nida.nih.gov/sites/default/files/podat-3rdEd-508.pdf>

[2] SAMHSA: Treatment Types for Mental Health, Drugs and Alcohol

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-support/learn-about-treatment/types-of-treatment>

[3] SAMHSA: Finding Quality Treatment

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-support/learn-about-treatment/finding-quality-treatment>

[4] NIAAA: 10 Questions for Alcohol Treatment Programs

<https://alcoholtreatment.niaaa.nih.gov/how-to-find-alcohol-treatment/10-questions-for-alcohol-treatment-programs>

[5] Medicare: Intensive Outpatient Program Services

<https://www.medicare.gov/coverage/mental-health-care-outpatient-intensive-outpatient-program-services>

[6] Medicare: Partial Hospitalization

<https://www.medicare.gov/coverage/mental-health-care-outpatient-partial-hospitalization>