



Addiction is particularly destructive for skilled and licensed professionals due to the demands and expectations in their work.

This guide will provide timely information for Dentists struggling with drug and alcohol addiction.



# Dentists and Addiction Treatment

## Introduction

Statistics show that between 10 and 12 percent of the general population gets addicted to alcohol or drugs at some point in their lives. However, according to representative with the Arizona State Board of Dental Examiners' Monitored Aftercare Treatment Program, the prevalence of addiction among dentists and other medical professionals is 12 to 19 percent.

The reasons for this increased vulnerability to substance use disorder are manifold and constantly changing. That said, those in the dental profession maintain that the dental practice itself can act as an enabler.

According to figures from the American Dental Association (ADA), seventy-six percent of dentists are the sole proprietor of their practice. Strongly independent, these professionals spend many hours in deep focus while hunched over a patient's mouth. For this reason, more than 90 percent of practicing dentists reported having musculoskeletal pain as a result of their work, according to a 2016 ADA study.

Meanwhile, emotional stress can stem from the isolation of running one's own practice, which the Centers for Disease Control cites as a contributing factor for suicide. While dentists are in close contact with other people all day long, they're also perceived to be people with the potential to cause pain, making it difficult to develop personal relationships with their patients.

And then there's debt: The ADA reports that 80 percent of dental students graduating in 2016 were carrying \$100,000 or more in debt, while the average debt for dental school students in 2016 was \$261,149. And then there's the price of launching a practice, with staff, equipment, and real estate costs. Such debt leads to extended work hours and precious few vacations. Inevitable anxiety, depression, and anger issues can give way to substance use and abuse.

Combine these factors with razor thin profit margins and heavy competition with other practices, and the stressors of the average dental professional's life can feel overwhelming. A 2004 survey of 3,500 dentists showed that 38 percent reported they were "frequently or always" worried or anxious, while 34 percent said they were "frequently or always" physically or emotionally exhausted.

Meanwhile, the escape valve of substance use beckons.

## Alcohol

Reports from the American Dental Association's Dentist Health and Wellness Committee suggest that alcohol is the drug of choice for 37 percent of dentists who live with substance use disorders. Seeing as the use of alcohol is socially acceptable and easy to procure, these high rates of alcoholism amid those in the medical and dental professions should not come as much of a surprise.

## Drugs of Opportunity

While alcohol is the drug of choice among those in the medical and dental professions, prescription

drugs are not far behind, with a 31 percent use rate. The reasons for this are also easy to figure out—prescriptions drugs are readily obtained by doctors qualified to prescribe them.

While opiates, mostly hydrocodone and oxycodone, are the main prescription drugs abused, nitrous oxide, also known as “laughing gas,” is widely abused among those in the dental profession.

What often happens is dental professionals accidentally catch a whiff of the drug while administering it to patients during complex procedures. This small yet consisted exposure can lead to purposeful and frequent abuse, which can lead to addiction among roughly 5 percent of this population.

## Street Drugs

Street drugs, or those that are illegally obtained, including cocaine, marijuana, heroin, and benzodiazepine, are also in use among dentists and other medical professionals, making up 10 percent of this population’s drug of choice.

According to reports, the prevalence  
of addiction among dentists and  
other medical professionals is  
**12 to 19 percent.**



## Risk Factors of Addiction

The risk factors of substance abuse for any population involve a range of biological, psychological, and socioeconomic issues. While these factors interact differently in different people, resulting in different symptoms and experiences, researchers have found broad similarities when it comes to the biggest risks for developing a substance use disorder.

## Suicide

While there are problems with determining a person’s risk of suicide by their line of work, there has long been a correlation between those in the dental profession and a proclivity toward suicide. This stems in part from a study led by Steven Stack, a criminal justice professor at Wayne State University, who in 1996 studied decades of records regarding suicide rates and dentists and found that that being a dentist increased one’s risk of attempting suicide by more than 500 percent.

While there is little evidence addressing the association between substance abuse and suicide among those in the dental profession, recent studies demonstrate a link between substance use disorder and suicide in the general population.



A 2004 survey of 3,500 dentists showed that **38 percent** reported they were "frequently or always" worried or anxious.

## Family Problems

Like many mental health disorders, substance use disorders tend to wreak havoc on the family unit. Left untreated, an addiction can progress so far that it damages all family relationships. This can lead to a sense of isolation and resentment on the part of the addict and a sense of confusion and hopelessness among his or her loved ones.

The family members of those in the dental profession can experience their own mental health issues as a result of their loved ones' involvement in substance abuse. For example, a mother whose son or daughter is struggling with addiction or mental health issues might suffer from severe anxiety due to the fear of what could happen to her child.

It is therefore imperative to our clients' recovery that his or her loved ones get actively involved in the recovery process.

## Long-term Health Problems

Alcohol and substance abuse can have a variety of long-term health effects, depending on which drug or drugs are involved, how they are taken, the amounts taken, the person's overall physical and mental health, and other factors.

While short-term effects range from changes in heart rate and blood pressure, stroke, psychosis, and overdose, long-term effects can include heart or lung disease, cancer, mental illness, kidney damage, liver damage, HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, and other conditions.

## How JourneyPure Can Help

JourneyPure Center for Professional Excellence reaches out to the dental and medical professional community through its specialized programming. We ensure that all dental professionals can obtain our unique, individualized approach to addiction and mental health treatment to regain control of their lives and restore their professional standing.

At JourneyPure, we provide comprehensive, specialized treatment with the individual client top of mind. In



addition to medical detoxification and medication-assisted treatment (MAT), we provide residential, partial hospitalization, and intensive outpatient programming.

It is our mission to encourage strong, solidified recovery that lasts a lifetime so that dental and medical professionals can learn how to better manage the ups and downs of everyday life, including the demands of their chosen careers.

At JourneyPure, we provide  
**comprehensive specialized**  
treatment tailored to the  
individual clients' specific needs.



## Family Therapy

JourneyPure Center for Professional Excellence places a special emphasis on family and couples therapy. Not only does this therapy strengthen the bonds of understanding between family members, it also helps educate the entire family, which in turn helps the addicted individual realize he or she is not alone in working through his or her recovery.

## Resources and Books

### **When Dentists Do Drugs: A Prescription for Prevention by Eric K. Curtis, DDS, MAGD**

<http://www.dentistwellbeing.com/pdf/DentistsDoDrugs.pdf>

### **American Dental Association, Center for Professional Success**

[https://success.ada.org/en/wellness?\\_ga=2.229720860.1829098907.1556569444-1631920368.1556224152](https://success.ada.org/en/wellness?_ga=2.229720860.1829098907.1556569444-1631920368.1556224152)

### **American Dental Association, Dentist Well-Being Program Handbook**

[https://www.ada.org/~media/ADA/Files/ADA\\_Dentist\\_WellBeing%20Handbook.pdf?la=en](https://www.ada.org/~media/ADA/Files/ADA_Dentist_WellBeing%20Handbook.pdf?la=en)