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# FACING ADDICTION IN AMERICA

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*The Surgeon General's Report on  
Alcohol, Drugs, and Health*



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2016

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services



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# MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES



All across the United States, individuals, families, communities, and health care systems are struggling to cope with substance use, misuse, and substance use disorders. Substance misuse and substance use disorders have devastating effects, disrupt the future plans of too many young people, and all too often, end lives prematurely and tragically. Substance misuse is a major public health challenge and a priority for our nation to address.

Fortunately, we have made considerable progress in recent years. First, decades of scientific research and technological advances have given us a better understanding of the functioning and neurobiology of the brain and how substance use affects brain chemistry and our capacity for self-control.

One of the important findings of this research is that addiction is a chronic neurological disorder and needs to be treated as other chronic conditions are. Second, this Administration and others before it, as well as the private sector, have invested in research, development, and evaluation of programs to prevent and treat substance misuse, as well as support recovery. We now have many of the tools we need to protect children, young people, and adults from the negative health consequences of substance misuse; provide individuals with substance use disorders the treatment they need to lead healthy and productive lives; and help people stay substance-free. Finally, the enactment of the Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008 and the Affordable Care Act in 2010 are helping increase access to prevention and treatment services.

The effects of substance use are cumulative and costly for our society, placing burdens on workplaces, the health care system, families, states, and communities. *The Surgeon General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health* is another important step in our efforts to address the issue. This historic *Report* explains, in clear and understandable language, the effects on the brain of alcohol and drugs and how misuse can become a disorder. It describes the considerable evidence showing that prevention, treatment, and recovery policies and programs really do work. For example, minimum legal drinking age laws, funding for multi-sector community-based coalitions to plan and implement effective prevention interventions with fidelity, screening and brief intervention for alcohol use, needle/syringe exchange programs, behavioral counseling, pharmacologic interventions such as buprenorphine for opioid misuse, and mutual aid groups have all been shown effective in preventing, reducing, treating, and sustaining recovery from substance misuse and substance use disorders.

The *Report* discusses opportunities to bring substance use disorder treatment and mainstream health care systems into alignment so that they can address a person's overall health, rather than a substance misuse or a physical health condition alone or in isolation. It also provides suggestions and recommendations for action that everyone—individuals, families, community leaders, law enforcement, health care professionals, policymakers, and researchers—can take to prevent substance misuse and reduce its consequences.

Throughout, the *Report* provides examples of how individuals, organizations, and communities can partner to lessen and eliminate substance misuse. These efforts have to start now. Change takes time and long-term commitment, as well as collaboration among key stakeholders. As the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, I encourage you to use the information and findings in this *Report* to take action so that we can improve the health of those we love and make our communities healthier and stronger.

Sylvia Mathews Burwell  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services



# FOREWORD FROM THE PRINCIPAL DEPUTY ADMINISTRATOR, SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ADMINISTRATION



Substance misuse is one of the critical public health problems of our time. The most recent data on substance use, misuse, and substance use disorders reveal that the problem is deepening and the consequences are becoming more deadly than ever. There is an urgent need to raise awareness about the issue. At the same time, we need to spread the word that substance misuse and addiction are solvable problems. We can, and must, inspire and catalyze action on this crisis.

That's why I am so proud to support the Office of the Surgeon General in releasing this first report of its kind – *The Surgeon General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health*.

This *Report* takes a comprehensive look at the problem; covering topics including misuse of alcohol, prescription drugs, and other substances, and bringing together the best available science on the adverse health consequences of substance misuse. It also summarizes what we know about what works in prevention, treatment, and recovery. Our goal: to equip health care providers, communities, policymakers, law enforcement, and others with the evidence, the tools, and the information they need to take action to address this growing epidemic.

Now is the time for this *Report*. The substance misuse problem in America won't wait. Almost 22.5 million people reported use of an illegal drug in the prior year. Over 20 million people have substance use disorders, and 12.5 million Americans reported misusing prescription pain relievers in the past year. Seventy-eight people die every day in the United States from an opioid overdose, and those numbers have nearly quadrupled since 1999. Despite the fact that we have treatments we know are effective, only one in five people who currently need treatment for opioid use disorders is actually receiving it.

The addiction problem touches us all. We all need to play a part in solving it. *The Surgeon General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health* provides a roadmap for working together to move our efforts forward. I hope all who read it will be inspired to take action to stem the rising tide of this public health crisis and reduce the impact of substance misuse and addiction on individuals, communities, and our nation.

Kana Enomoto  
Principal Deputy Administrator  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services



# PREFACE FROM THE SURGEON GENERAL, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES



Before I assumed my position as U.S. Surgeon General, I stopped by the hospital where I had worked since my residency training to say goodbye to my colleagues. I wanted to thank them, especially the nurses, whose kindness and guidance had helped me on countless occasions. The nurses had one parting request for me. If you can only do one thing as Surgeon General, they said, please do something about the addiction crisis in America.

I have not forgotten their words. As I have traveled across our extraordinary nation, meeting people struggling with substance use disorders and their families, I have come to appreciate even more deeply something I recognized through my own experience in patient care: that substance use disorders represent one of the most pressing public health crises of our time.

Whether it is the rapid rise of prescription opioid addiction or the longstanding challenge of alcohol dependence, substance misuse and substance use disorders can—and do—prevent people from living healthy and productive lives. And, just as importantly, they have profound effects on families, friends, and entire communities.

I recognize there is no single solution. We need more policies and programs that increase access to proven treatment modalities. We need to invest more in expanding the scientific evidence base for prevention, treatment, and recovery. We also need a cultural shift in how we think about addiction. For far too long, too many in our country have viewed addiction as a moral failing. This unfortunate stigma has created an added burden of shame that has made people with substance use disorders less likely to come forward and seek help. It has also made it more challenging to marshal the necessary investments in prevention and treatment. We must help everyone see that addiction is not a character flaw – it is a chronic illness that we must approach with the same skill and compassion with which we approach heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.

I am proud to release *The Surgeon General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health*. As the first ever Surgeon General's Report on this important topic, this *Report* aims to shift the way our society thinks about substance misuse and substance use disorders while defining actions we can take to prevent and treat these conditions.

Over the past few decades, we have built a robust evidence base on this subject. We now know that there is a neurobiological basis for substance use disorders with potential for both recovery and recurrence. We have evidence-based interventions that prevent harmful substance use and related problems, particularly when started early. We also have proven interventions for treating substance use disorders, often involving a combination of medication, counseling, and social support. Additionally, we have

learned that recovery has many pathways that should be tailored to fit the unique cultural values and psychological and behavioral health needs of each individual.

As Surgeon General, I care deeply about the health and well-being of all who are affected by substance misuse and substance use disorders. This *Report* offers a way forward through a public health approach that is firmly grounded in the best available science. Recognizing that we all have a role to play, the *Report* contains suggested actions that are intended for parents, families, educators, health care professionals, public policy makers, researchers, and all community members.

Above all, we can never forget that the faces of substance use disorders are real people. They are a beloved family member, a friend, a colleague, and ourselves. Despite the significant work that remains ahead of us, there are reasons to be hopeful. I find hope in the people I have met in recovery all across America who are now helping others with substance use disorders find their way. I draw strength from the communities I have visited that are coming together to work on prevention initiatives and to connect more people to treatment. And I am inspired by the countless family members who have lost loved ones to addiction and who have transformed their pain into a passion for helping others. These individuals and communities are rays of hope. It is now our collective duty to bring such light to all corners of our country.

How we respond to this crisis is a moral test for America. Are we a nation willing to take on an epidemic that is causing great human suffering and economic loss? Are we able to live up to that most fundamental obligation we have as human beings: to care for one another?

Fifty years ago, the landmark Surgeon General's report on the dangers of smoking began a half century of work to end the tobacco epidemic and saved millions of lives. With *The Surgeon General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health*, I am issuing a new call to action to end the public health crisis of addiction. Please join me in taking the actions outlined in this *Report* and in helping ensure that all Americans can lead healthy and fulfilling lives.

Vivek H. Murthy, M.D., M.B.A.  
Vice Admiral, U.S. Public Health Service  
Surgeon General

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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