



What Is Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT)?

Starting treatment for drugs or alcohol addiction is a brave and important step. This will help you understand what to expect and how to make the most of your journey. If you are considering taking medication, like methadone, buprenorphine (Suboxone®) or long-acting shots, this information can help explain how these can help you feel better and stay healthy.

MAT uses medicines to help treat drug or alcohol addiction. These medicines can make your brain feel more balanced, reduce and even eliminate cravings, and help you recover.

Here are some common medications:

- ▶ **Methadone:** This can help people who are addicted to opioids, like heroin or painkillers, by helping to stop withdrawal symptoms and reduce cravings. It is taken once a day as a liquid or tablet at an Opioid Treatment Program (OTP) clinic. Because it stays in the body for a long time, it helps people feel stable and focus on their recovery instead of worrying about cravings.
- ▶ **Buprenorphine (Suboxone®):** This medicine is like methadone but can be taken at home with a prescription from a doctor. It comes as a dissolvable film or tablet that goes under your tongue or as a long-acting injection. It can help stop cravings and withdrawal but does not cause the same high as opioids and can make it easier to quit using drugs.
- ▶ **Naltrexone (like Vivitrol®):** This medication works differently from methadone and buprenorphine. Instead of reducing cravings, it blocks the effects of opioids and alcohol. If someone takes opioids or drinks while on this medication, they will not feel the usual high. It comes as a daily pill or a monthly shot. It works best for people who have already gone through withdrawal and want extra help to stay sober.
- ▶ **Long-Acting Injection:** Some medications are available as shots that can last for a month or longer. These shots can make it easier for people to stay on their medication because they do not have to remember to take a pill every day. They help block the effects of drugs or alcohol and can reduce cravings.

Your doctor will talk to you about the appropriate medicine for you in your current circumstance. Remember, these medicines work best when you also go to counseling and make healthy changes in your life.

Effectiveness of Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT)

Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) can be a highly effective approach to treating substance use disorders, particularly opioid and alcohol use disorder. Research has shown that MAT can significantly improve recovery outcomes by reducing or eliminating cravings, preventing relapse and lowering the risk of overdose.

Here's why MAT can be an effective tool for recovery:

1. Reduces Cravings and Withdrawal Symptoms

One of the biggest challenges in recovery is dealing with cravings and withdrawal. Medications like methadone and buprenorphine can help stabilize brain chemistry, reduce the intensity and in some cases eliminate withdrawal symptoms, making it easier to focus on recovery.

2. Lowers the Risk of Relapse

Many individuals struggle with repeated relapses. Studies show that people using MAT are more likely to stay in treatment and less likely to return to substance use compared to those relying solely on counseling or abstinence-based programs.

3. Reduces the Risk of Overdose and Death

One of the most serious risks of opioid use is overdose. According to research from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), people who use MAT have a significantly lower risk of dying from an opioid overdose – by more than 50%.

4. Improves Mental Health and Stability

Substance use disorders often co-exist with mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety. MAT can help stabilize mood and cognitive function, allowing individuals to engage more fully in therapy and other aspects of recovery.

5. Supports Long-Term Recovery

Recovery is a long-term journey, and MAT provides ongoing support by helping individuals maintain their recovery and rebuild their lives. When combined with counseling, behavioral therapies and peer support groups, MAT can lead to higher long-term success rates.

Addressing Common Misconceptions

Some people worry that MAT is just “replacing one addiction with another.” However, research confirms that MAT does not create a new dependency in the same way that substance use does. Instead, it can help individuals regain control and lead productive and healthy lives.

Understanding that substance use and opioid use disorders are chronic medical conditions can help underscore the role of medications in treatment. If someone is seeking medical treatment for their high blood pressure, they will be offered medications as well as suggestions on new behaviors, like diet and exercise, to help them manage their medical condition. Similarly, patients with substance use and opioid use are often treated with an approach that includes medications, counseling and other activities to help them manage their disorder and recover.

MAT medications are carefully regulated and prescribed by healthcare professionals to help stabilize brain chemistry, whereas using illicit substances can lead to cycles of craving and the highs and lows associated with substance use disorder.

Another misconception is that people on MAT are not truly in recovery. However, many experts, including the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) recognize MAT as a legitimate and life-saving form of treatment. Recovery is about creating a stable, healthy and fulfilling life free from addiction and many people find success with the help of medication.

Don't Be Ashamed of Taking Medicine

Some people worry about what others think when they take medicine for addiction. But using MAT is no different than taking medicine for other health problems, like diabetes or heart disease. For example, someone with heart disease might take medicine every day to stay healthy and they don't feel ashamed. These medicines help you and there's no need to feel bad about it.

Taking medicine is only part of recovery. You also need to:

- ▶ **Go to all your appointments.**
- ▶ **Follow your doctor's instructions.**
- ▶ **Follow your counselors' suggestions.**
- ▶ **Join support groups and work on building a healthy life.**

Find Support in Your Community

You don't have to do this alone. Recovery is easier when your loved ones are part of your journey. There are many mutual support groups that can support your recovery, including:

12-Step Groups: Groups like Alcoholics Anonymous® (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous® (NA) bring people together to share their experiences. Visit aa.org or na.org.

Faith-Based Groups: Some churches or spiritual groups offer recovery programs that focus on faith. Celebrate Recovery (celebraterecovery.com) or The Most Excellent Way (tmewcf.org) are two examples of faith-based mutual support.

Non-Spiritual/Non-religious Mutual Support (online or in-person): SMART Recovery (smartrecovery.org) offers in-person and online meetings and tools to help you recover.

These groups can give you a safe place to talk, get support and feel connected to others who understand what you're going through.

How Your Family and Friends Can Help

Your family and friends are an important part of your recovery. Involving them in your treatment can make you stronger and help you stay on track. Here's how they can help:

Learn About Recovery

When your loved ones learn about addiction and treatment, they can better understand what you are going through.

Be Supportive

Family therapy or group talks can help fix problems and build trust.

Set Boundaries

Healthy boundaries are important. This means everyone knows what to expect and can support each other better.

Starting treatment is a big deal. It shows that you care about yourself and your future. Recovery isn't always easy, but it's worth it. With the help of your treatment team, loved ones and support groups, you can build a better, healthier life. You should be proud of the steps you are taking. Each day you stay in treatment is another step toward a brighter future. **You've got this!**