

Levels of Care for Addiction Treatment

Glossary

The decision to break the cycle of addiction and enter treatment for a substance use disorder is the first step on the road to recovery. Researching addiction treatment centers and the programs and services offered can be complex and confusing. However, almost all addiction treatment centers follow a recognized continuum of care.

“Continuum of care” refers to a treatment system in which patients enter treatment at a level appropriate to their needs and then step up to more intense treatment or down to less intense treatment as needed.¹

The following glossary offers a quick introduction to the continuum of care most often offered in addiction treatment programs. These definitions provide a general overview, so discussing the levels of care and treatment services with your specific treatment center is essential.

Detox and Withdrawal

Detox

A process that assists people in removing drugs or alcohol from their system. It can be done at a hospital, detox center, or addiction treatment facility under medical supervision.

Withdrawal Symptoms

A group of physical and emotional symptoms that occur when someone stops using drugs or alcohol after a period of heavy use. These symptoms can range from mild to severe, including anxiety, depression, tremors, sweating, and nausea. In some extreme cases of addiction, withdrawal can be life-threatening, which is why professional treatment is needed.

¹ Substance Abuse: Clinical Issues in Intensive Outpatient Treatment – “Intensive Outpatient Treatment and the Continuum of Care”



Inpatient and Residential Levels of Care

Inpatient Care

This level of care involves staying at a hospital or addiction treatment center for a specific period of time. This level of care provides 24-hour medical support and supervision. It is suitable for people who require intensive medical care during the early stages of recovery. Many patients transition to an outpatient program after completing their inpatient treatment.

Residential Care

These programs provide treatment in a residential setting and can last from one month to a year, as needed. This level of care provides a structured environment with access to counseling, therapy, and group support. Typically, residents go through different phases as they progress through the program. It provides a more home-like, less clinical setting and is suitable for people needing more recovery time.²

Outpatient Levels of Care

Partial Hospitalization Program (PHP)

A level of outpatient care that provides daily treatment for several hours a day at a hospital or addiction treatment facility. It includes access to counseling, therapy, and group support. It is suitable for people who have completed inpatient or residential care and need a higher degree of accountability and more structured care than an intensive outpatient program or regular outpatient treatment.

Intensive Outpatient Program (IOP)

At this level of care, clients attend 10-20 hours of treatment a week at a specialty facility while continuing to live at home. Many programs make services

² Partnership to End Addiction – “What Types of Addiction Treatment Are Available?”



available in the evenings and on weekends so individuals can continue to work or stay in school. This is a better option for individuals with accompanying medical or psychological issues who need multiple services, or have not been successful in outpatient treatment.³


Outpatient Program (OP)


A level of outpatient care that provides weekly or bi-weekly treatment. It includes access to counseling, therapy, and group support. It is suitable for people who have completed inpatient, residential, or intensive outpatient care and require ongoing support while maintaining sobriety.

Aftercare and Alumni Programs

These programs offer support and guidance for people who have completed addiction treatment. They can include regular meetings, group support, and access to counseling and therapy. These programs are suitable for people who have completed any level of care and require ongoing support to maintain their sobriety.

Narrative Examples

 John has completed inpatient care for alcohol use disorder after years of alcoholism and is now ready to transition back to everyday life. He enrolls in an intensive outpatient program (IOP) that provides several hours of treatment several times a week. This level of care allows John to receive ongoing support and guidance as he adjusts to life outside of treatment. Once John completes the IOP, he enrolls in a regular outpatient treatment program that provides weekly treatment sessions. He also joins an alumni program offering group support and counseling access. These programs provide John with the support he needs to maintain his sobriety long-term.

 Susan was prescribed opioid painkillers by her doctor and is concerned she may be developing a problem because she is beginning to take them

³ Partnership to End Addiction – “What Types of Addiction Treatment Are Available?”



more often than prescribed. She immediately contacts a treatment center and is enrolled in an outpatient program. Her early recognition of a potential problem most likely prevented her from becoming dependent or addicted to painkillers and requiring a more intensive level of care.

Keep Informed and Explore All Your Treatment Options

Deciding to seek treatment for a substance use disorder is the best way to regain control of your life and maintain sobriety. Finding the right treatment center for you is essential, so keep this glossary of terms handy as you explore your treatment options.



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