



## Understanding Risk and Protective Factors

Risk factors are characteristics that make an individual more susceptible to substance use disorders.

The age someone starts using alcohol or drugs is a significant risk factor. The earlier someone starts using substances, the greater their chances of developing a substance use disorder, and the more severe their illness is likely to be.

Research also suggests that genetic factors account for about half of a person’s likelihood of developing a substance use disorder. While we can’t change our genetics, knowing about a family history of addiction should empower us to make different decisions about our substance use.

Other factors that put a person at risk for an addiction include parental substance misuse, trauma, and a lack of social attachments. These are called individual factors and they’re part of the “big three” in areas of risk -- individual, environmental and genetic. Environmental factors include high drug availability, poverty, a lack of laws and enforcement, and social norms.

For every risk factor, there is a protective factor to counter-balance it. Strengthening the protective factors that we can control is important for both preventing the illness in other family members and relatives as well as supporting an individual with a substance use disorder in recovery.

