

My son is 33 years old. I believe he has gone from drinking socially to what I might call an alcoholic. I am so worried about him. Can you tell me what warning signs our family should be looking for, and what we can do to help him?

Drinking is woven into the fabric of our society—sharing a bottle of wine over a meal, going out for drinks with friends or celebrating a special occasion with champagne. But because alcohol is such a common, popular element in so many activities, it can be hard to see when your drinking has crossed the line from moderate or social use to problem drinking. Alcoholism and alcohol abuse can sneak up on you, so it's important to be aware of the warning signs of a drinking problem and take steps to cut back if you recognize them. And, if you or a loved one is already in the throes of an alcohol addiction, take heart. Understanding the problem is the first step to overcoming it.

Many people drink regularly without experiencing any harmful effects, other than perhaps a slight hangover on rare occasions. Yet millions of others suffer from alcoholism and alcohol abuse, making even an occasional drink dangerous.

How can some people drink responsibly, while others drink to the point of losing their health, their family or their job? There are no simple answers. Drinking problems are due to many interconnected factors, including genetics, how you were raised, your social environment and your emotional health. People who have a family history of alcoholism or who suffer from a mental health problem, such as anxiety, depression or bipolar disorder are particularly at risk, because alcohol may be used to self-medicate these symptoms.

Since drinking is so common in our culture and the effects vary so widely from person to person, it's not always easy to figure out where the line is between social drinking and problem drinking. Taking an honest look at why you drink may help you figure out on which side of the line you fall and remember the bottom line is how alcohol affects you. One thing is clear, if your drinking is causing problems in your life, you have a drinking problem.

Substance abuse experts make a distinction between alcohol abuse and alcoholism (also called alcohol dependence). Unlike alcoholics, individuals who abuse alcohol still have at least some ability to set limits on their drinking. However, their alcohol use is still self-destructive and dangerous to themselves or others.

Common signs and symptoms of alcohol abuse include

- Repeatedly neglecting your responsibilities at home, work or school because of your drinking.
- Using alcohol in situations where it's physically dangerous, such as driving, operating machinery or mixing with prescription medication.
- Experiencing repeated legal problems due to alcohol consumption and continuing to drink even when alcohol use is causing relationship problems.

Alcoholism is the most severe form of problem drinking and involves all of the symptoms of alcohol abuse, but it also involves another element: physical dependence on alcohol. There's a fine line between alcohol abuse and alcoholism, but if you rely on alcohol to function or feel physically compelled to drink, you've crossed it.

Tolerance is the *first major warning sign of alcoholism*. Do you have to drink more than you used to in order to get intoxicated? Can you drink more than other people without getting drunk? These are signs of alcohol tolerance – the first warning sign of alcoholism. Tolerance means that, over time, you need more and more alcohol to feel the same effects you used to with smaller amounts.

Withdrawal is the *second major warning sign of alcoholism*. Do you need a drink to steady the shakes in the morning? Drinking to relieve or avoid withdrawal symptoms is a sign of alcoholism and a huge red flag. When you drink heavily, your body gets used to the alcohol and experiences withdrawal symptoms if it's taken away. Alcohol withdrawal symptoms may include: anxiety, shakiness, sweating, nausea and vomiting, insomnia, depression, irritability, fatigue, loss of appetite and headaches. In severe cases, withdrawal from alcohol also may involve hallucinations, confusion, seizures, fever and agitation. These symptoms can be dangerous.

Alcoholism and alcohol abuse can affect all aspects of your life. To start, long-term alcohol use can cause serious health complications, affecting virtually every organ in your body, including your brain. What's more, problem drinking also may damage your emotional stability, your finances, your mental status, your career and your ability to build and sustain satisfying relationships. Alcoholism and alcohol abuse have an impact on your family, your friends, the people you work with and even the greater community you live in.

Denial is one of the biggest obstacles to getting help for alcohol abuse and alcoholism. The desire to drink is so strong that the mind finds many ways to rationalize drinking, even when the consequences are obvious. Unfortunately, denial often increases as drinking gets worse and keeps you from looking honestly at your behavior and its negative effects. Denial also exacerbates alcohol-related problems with work, finances and relationships. It's a vicious cycle.

Those in recovery fight to maintain recovery throughout their lifetime. Ending the use of the drug of choice plays only a small role in staying clean. In our community, there are options for facing a drinking problem. **If you do not know where to start, contact COMCARE of Sedgwick County 316-660-7540. COMCARE is a licensed Community Mental Health Center and Certified Drug Treatment program for all Sedgwick County residents.**

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