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## Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse

### Alcohol a “Norm” in American Society

Drinking is woven into the fabric of our society - sharing a bottle of wine over a meal, going out for drinks with friends and celebrating special occasions 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.

### What is considered moderate drinking?

Moderate is probably less than you think.

- For women: no more than 1 drink per day
- For men: up to 2 drinks per day

### How much is too much?

- For women: more than 7 drinks per week or 3 drinks per occasion
- For men: more than 14 drinks per week or 4 drinks per occasion

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, family or 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 themselves 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.

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 which best describes your reason for drinking. Remember, the bottom line is how alcohol affects you. If your drinking is causing problems in your life, you have a drinking problem.

### Do you have a drinking problem?

You may have a drinking problem if you:

- Can never stick to “just one” drink.
- Feel guilty or ashamed about your drinking.
- Lie to others or hide your drinking habits.
- Have friends or family members who are worried about your drinking.
- Need to drink in order to relax or feel better.
- Ever “black out” or forget what you did while you were drinking.
- Regularly drink more than you intended to.



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### What are the signs and symptoms of alcohol abuse?

Substance abuse experts make a distinction between alcohol abuse and alcoholism (also called alcohol dependence). Unlike alcoholics, alcohol abusers 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. For example, performing poorly at work, flunking classes, neglecting your kids, or skipping out on commitments because you're hung over.
- Using alcohol in situations where it's physically dangerous, such as drinking and driving, operating machinery while intoxicated, or mixing alcohol with prescription medication against doctor's orders.
- Experiencing repeated legal problems on account of your drinking. For example, getting arrested for driving under the influence or drunk and disorderly conduct.
- Continuing to drink even though your alcohol use is causing problems in your relationships. Getting drunk with your buddies, for example, even though you know your wife will be very upset, or fighting with your family because they dislike how you act when you drink.

### The path from alcohol abuse to alcoholism:

Not all alcohol abusers become full-blown alcoholics, but it is certainly a big risk factor. Sometimes alcoholism develops suddenly in response to a stressful change, such as a breakup, retirement or another loss. Other times, it gradually creeps up on you as your tolerance to alcohol increases. If you're a binge drinker or you drink every day, the risks of developing alcoholism are even greater. But whether alcohol abuse turns into alcohol addiction, many of the problems will be the same.

### What are the signs and symptoms of alcoholism (alcohol dependence)?

Alcoholism is the most severe form of problem drinking. Alcoholism involves all 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:** The first major warning sign of alcoholism. Do you have to drink a lot more than you used to in order to get buzzed? Can you drink more than other people without getting drunk? These are signs of 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:** 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 include:

- Anxiety or jumpiness
- Shakiness or trembling
- Sweating
- Nausea and vomiting
- Insomnia
- Depression
- Irritability
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Headache

In severe cases, withdrawal from alcohol also may involve hallucinations, confusion, seizures, fever and agitation. These symptoms can be dangerous, so talk to your doctor if you are a heavy drinker and want to quit.



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### Other signs and symptoms of alcoholism (alcohol dependence)

- You've lost control over your drinking. You often drink more alcohol than you wanted to, for longer than you intended, despite telling yourself you wouldn't.
- You want to quit drinking, but you can't. You have a persistent desire to cut down or stop your alcohol use, but your efforts to quit have been unsuccessful.
- You have given up other activities because of alcohol. You're spending less time on activities that used to be important to you (hanging out with family and friends, going to the gym, pursuing your hobbies) because of your alcohol abuse.
- Alcohol takes up a great deal of your energy and focus. You spend a lot of time drinking, thinking about it, or recovering from its effects. Often, drinking is the center of your social life.
- You drink even though you know it's causing problems. For example, you recognize that your alcohol abuse is damaging your marriage, making your depression worse, or causing health problems, but you continue to drink anyway.

### Drinking Problems and Denial

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 by keeping 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.

### If you have a drinking problem, you may deny it by:

- Drastically underestimating how much you drink
- Downplaying the negative consequences of your drinking
- Complaining that family and friends are exaggerating the problem
- Blaming your drinking or drinking-related problems on others

For example, you may blame an 'unfair boss' for trouble at work or a 'nagging wife' for your marital issues, rather than look at how your drinking is contributing to the problem. While work, relationship and financial stresses happen to everyone, an overall pattern of deterioration and blaming others may be a sign of trouble.

If, once again, you find yourself rationalizing your drinking habits, lying about them or refusing to discuss the subject, take a moment to consider why you're so defensive. If you truly believe you don't have a problem, why do you feel the need to cover up your drinking or make excuses? Is it possible that your drinking means more to you than you're ready to admit?

### Five Myths About Alcoholism

Getting to the truth behind the myths that you may be using to justify your drinking is crucial to breaking down the wall of denial.

**Myth #1:** I can stop drinking anytime I want to.

Maybe you can; more likely, you can't. Either way, it's just an excuse to keep drinking. The truth is, you don't want to stop. Telling yourself you can quit makes you feel in control, despite all evidence to the contrary and no matter the damage it's doing.

**Myth #2:** My drinking is my problem. I'm the one it hurts, so no one has the right to tell me to stop.

It's true that the decision to quit drinking is ultimately up to you. But you are deceiving yourself if you think that your drinking hurts no one else but you. Alcoholism affects everyone around you—especially the people closest to you. Your problem is their problem.



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**Myth #3:** I don't drink every day, so I can't be an alcoholic OR I only drink wine or beer, so I can't be an alcoholic. Alcoholism isn't defined by what you drink, when you drink it, or even, to some extent, how much you drink. If your drinking is causing problems in your life, you may be an alcoholic and you definitely have a drinking problem—whether you drink daily or only on the weekends, down shots of tequila or stick to wine, have three drinks a day or three bottles.

**Myth #4:** I'm not an alcoholic because I have a job and I'm doing OK. You don't have to be homeless and drinking out of a brown paper bag to be an alcoholic. Many alcoholics are able to hold down jobs, get through school, and provide for their families. Some are even able to excel. But just because you're a high-functioning alcoholic doesn't mean you're not putting yourself or others in danger. Over time, the effects will catch up with you.

**Myth #5:** Drinking is not a "real" addiction like drug abuse. Alcohol is a drug, and alcoholism is every bit as damaging as drug addiction. Alcohol addiction causes changes in the body and brain, and long-term alcohol abuse can have devastating effects on your health, your career and your relationships. Alcoholics go through physical withdrawal when they stop drinking, just like drug users do when they quit.

### What are the effects of alcoholism and alcohol abuse?

Alcoholism and alcohol abuse 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 can damage your emotional stability, your finances, your career and your ability to build and sustain satisfying relationships. But it doesn't stop there. 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.

### How does alcoholism and alcohol abuse affect the people you love?

Despite the potentially lethal damage that heavy drinking does to the body - including cancer, heart problems, and liver disease - the social consequences can be just as devastating. Alcoholics and alcohol abusers are much more likely to get divorced, have problems with domestic violence, struggle with unemployment, and live in poverty.

But even if you're able to succeed at work or hold your marriage together, you can't escape the effects that alcoholism and alcohol abuse has on your personal relationships. Drinking problems put an enormous strain on the people closest to you.

Often, family members and close friends feel obligated to cover for the person with the drinking problem. So they take on the burden of cleaning up your messes, lying for you or working more to make ends meet. Pretending that nothing is wrong and stuffing all of their fears and resentments inside takes an enormous toll. Children are especially sensitive and can suffer long-lasting emotional trauma.

### How does one get help for alcoholism or alcohol abuse?

If you're ready to face your drinking problem, congratulations! Admitting you have a problem is a huge first step. It takes tremendous strength and courage to face your alcohol abuse or alcoholism head on. The second step is reaching out for support.

As much as you may want to, don't try to face your drinking problem alone. Changing your drinking habits will be hard and you'll need support. Without it, it is very easy to rationalize just one more drink, especially since alcohol is everywhere in our society, or to fall back into old patterns when things get tough.



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### What about when a loved one has a drinking problem?

If someone you love has a drinking problem, you may be struggling with a number of painful emotions, including shame, fear, anger, and self-blame. The problem may be so overwhelming that it seems easier to ignore it and pretend that nothing is wrong. But you know that something is wrong, and in the long run, denying it will be more damaging to you, other family members, and the alcoholic.

### What Not To Do

- Don't attempt to punish, threaten, bribe or preach.
- Don't try to be a martyr. Avoid emotional appeals that may only increase feelings of guilt and the compulsion to drink or use other drugs.
- Don't allow yourself to cover up or make excuses for the alcoholic or drug addict or shield them from the realistic consequences of their behavior.
- Don't take over their responsibilities, leaving them with no sense of importance or dignity.
- Don't hide or dump bottles, throw out drugs or shelter them from situations where alcohol is present.
- Don't argue with the person when they are impaired or high.
- Don't try to drink along with the problem drinker or take drugs with the drug abuser.
- Above all, don't feel guilty or responsible for another's behavior.

Source: National Clearinghouse for Alcohol & Drug Information

Dealing with a loved one's alcohol problem can be an emotional rollercoaster. It's vital that you take care of yourself and get the support you need. Having people you can talk honestly and openly with about what you're going through is important.

A good place to start is by joining a group such as Al-Anon, a free peer support group for families coping with alcoholism. Listening to others with the same challenges can be a tremendous source of comfort and support. You also can turn to trusted friends, a therapist or people in your faith community.

- **You cannot force someone you love to stop abusing alcohol.** As much as you may want to, and as hard as it is to watch, you cannot make someone stop drinking. The choice is up to them.
- **Don't expect the person to stop drinking and stay sober without help.** Your loved one will need treatment, support, and new coping skills to overcome a serious drinking problem.

### Recovery is an ongoing process

Recovery is a bumpy road, requiring time and patience. An alcoholic will not magically become a different person once sober. And the problems that led to the alcohol abuse in the first place will have to be faced.

Admitting there's a serious problem can be painful for the whole family, not just the alcoholic. But don't be ashamed. You're not alone. Alcoholism affects millions of families, from every social class, race and culture. But there is help and support available for both you and your loved one.

For questions or information about substance abuse help, call COMCARE of Sedgwick County at

**316-660-7540**

or visit them online at

**[www.sedgwickcounty.org](http://www.sedgwickcounty.org)**