



Alcoholism

Definitions

Alcoholism and alcohol abuse are different conditions. Alcoholism is a term with which most people are familiar. Alcoholism, also known as alcohol dependence syndrome, is a chronic, progressive and dangerous disease, characterized by a strong need to drink despite negative consequences. It has a generally predictable course, has recognized symptoms, and is influenced by genetic, environmental and psychosocial factors.

Alcoholics cannot just use a little willpower to stop. They need outside assistance, support and treatment to be able to rebuild their lives.

Alcohol abuse, by contrast, does not include extremely strong craving, loss of control or physical dependence, and does not generally include tolerance. It is the continued use of alcohol despite recurrent and significant negative consequences related to use of alcohol. Alcohol abuse is accompanied by:

- Failure to fulfill major work, school or home responsibilities
- Drinking in situations that are physically dangerous, such as when driving a car, or operating heavy equipment
- Reoccurring alcohol-related legal problems

- Continued drinking despite ongoing relationship problems caused or worsened by alcohol.

Alcohol abuse and dependence are both treatable, but the sooner one seeks help, the better the results.

Prevalence and impact

If alcohol is a problem for you or someone you care about, do not feel alone. The problem of alcohol misuse is widespread and more prevalent than you might believe. Consider that:

- Alcohol is the most commonly abused substance in America.
- About 87 percent of people ages 18 or older report some alcohol use.
- About 9.3 million people ages 12–20 (24.3 percent of this age group) reported drinking alcohol in the past month.
- Nearly 25 percent of people ages 18 or older reported that they engaged in binge drinking in the past month drinking, meaning that they drank five 5 or more drinks on one occasion.
- 17 million Americans abuse alcohol or are alcoholics.
- Over half of persons in the U.S. report that one or more close relatives have a drinking problem.

Other things to consider:

- Alcohol use is strongly associated with illicit (illegal) drug use, with more than 1/4 of heavy drinkers being illicit drug users.
- Alcohol can be fatal: nearly 90,000 deaths per year can be attributed to alcohol misuse.
- • 31 percent of all fatal automobile accidents involve alcohol.

- 1/2 to 2/3 of drowning accidents are secondary to alcohol.
- Accidents of all types, including fires and falls, are increased with alcohol.
- Alcohol-related problems cost U.S. society \$223.5 billion dollars per year.
- The personal costs to humans are incalculable.

Complications

Alcohol travels to every cell in the body. Over time, using too much alcohol can damage the heart, raise blood pressure, cause cancer, liver disease and brain damage. It can lead to ulcers, weakened muscles and even death. Alcohol consumption causes a number of marked changes in behavior. Even low doses impair judgment and coordination. Higher levels result in more serious consequences, ranging from aggressive behavior to death. Long-term misuse of alcohol can lead to:

- Increased risk of a number of different cancers
- Cirrhosis of the liver
- Immune deficiencies
- Brain damage
- Depression
- Anger
- Deterioration in personal relationships
- Increased risk for automobile crashes, recreational accidents and on-the-job accidents, as well as homicide and suicide.

Symptoms

Symptoms of alcohol abuse can vary from one person to the next. But one behavioral pattern supersedes all symptoms: **Alcohol abuse occurs**

when people continue to drink even though their lives, responsibilities or relationships suffer because of their drinking.

Problem drinkers may have family histories of alcoholism. They also may exhibit these behaviors:

- *Getting drunk on a regular basis*
- *Spending disproportionate amounts of money and time on alcohol*
- *Suffering from hangovers or blackouts*
- *Missing work or other obligations because of drinking*
- *Using dangerously poor judgment while drinking, such as having unprotected sex with a stranger or breaking the law*
- *Denying that there's a problem*
- *Behaving inappropriately (taking off their clothes at an office party or urinating in public)*
- *Drinking in the morning, or instead of eating meals*
- *Lying or being secretive about drinking*
- *Drinking so much that emergency medical treatment is needed.*

Self-assessment

Most people have an alcoholic beverage now and again. However, binge drinking is not normal or healthy. Binge drinking is defined as drinking five or more servings of alcohol for men or four or more servings for women in one sitting. If you answer yes to any of the following questions, you may have an alcohol abuse problem:

- Have you ever boasted that you could easily quit drinking if you wanted to?
- Do you crave the feelings of escape that come with excessive drinking?

- Do you drink alone?
- Do you “need” to have a drink every day?
- Does it seem like you can drink everyone else “under the table”?
- Have your spouse and friends complained about your use of alcohol?
- Do you find yourself buying extra alcohol and hiding it from your family?
- Would you like to drink less frequently and in smaller quantities but can’t seem to stop yourself?
- Have you ever “blacked out”?
- Have you ever called in sick to work because of a hangover?

Treatment

Alcohol misuse and alcoholism are treatable. Effective approaches include treatment and support for quitting drinking (abstinence). Changing your alcohol use is a decision only you can make.

Hope lies in learning more. The more you understand about alcohol-related problems, the better you will understand that alcoholism is an illness, and is treatable. Treatment makes the difference. It offers help, hope and the ability to cope.

Types of treatment for alcohol problems include cognitive behavioral therapy, family therapy and support groups. Medications may be used to assist in treatment. Settings for treatment can include inpatient hospitalization and detoxification, residential treatment, intensive outpatient treatment (also known as day treatment or partial hospitalization), and outpatient therapy.

If you feel that you or someone about whom you care may have a problem with alcohol, there are a number of sources you can consider for help:

- Your family physician may be a good place to start if you are concerned for yourself. Take part in the decision making process for a referral. Your ability and willingness to be open and honest are critical to the success of your treatment.
 - A wide range of local community resources, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Alanon and Alateen, as well as many others, are listed online.
- Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) describes itself as a “worldwide fellowship of men and women who help each other to stay sober”. It is generally recognized as an effective, mutual help program for recovering alcoholics. Visit www.aa.org.
- Al-Anon Family Groups, including Alateen, provide support for family and friends of people in recovery from substance abuse. Visit www.al-anon.org.
- For general information about the problem of alcohol and related issues, access NIAAA, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, at www.niaaa.nih.gov.

Access helpful resources

Additional information, self-help tools and other resources are available to you online at www.MagellanHealth.com/member.

Reference: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

This document is for your information only. It is not meant to give medical advice. It should not be used to replace a visit with a provider. Magellan Health does not endorse other resources that may be mentioned here.