



Causes of alcoholism and alcohol abuse

Alcoholism is not a moral weakness, but an inborn part of body chemistry that can be inherited. However, inheriting this vulnerability does not necessarily determine one's destiny.

Knowing the facts can help you be alert to risks for alcohol-related disorders. It can also help you take action to prevent these disorders before they start to manifest themselves.

It is well established that alcoholism tends to run in families. Genetic factors partially explain this. Environmental factors also significantly influence whether or not an alcohol disorder will manifest itself. Environmental factors such as the influence of friends, stress levels and ease and acceptability of obtaining alcohol may contribute to the possibility or probability that one will develop an alcohol disorder. Other factors may help to protect the same person from an alcohol disorder.

We know that:

- Children of alcoholics have a 2-4 times greater risk of developing alcoholism than children of non-alcoholics. They are much more likely to begin drinking during adolescence and to develop alcoholism.

- Young people who began drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence and twice as likely to abuse alcohol. The younger the age of drinking onset, the greater the chance that a person at some point in life will develop a clinically defined alcohol disorder. Over 40 percent of persons who begin drinking before age 15 are classified as alcohol dependent, versus 10 percent who began drinking after age 21.
- The converse is also true: The risk for alcohol dependence and alcohol abuse decrease by 14 percent for each increasing year of age of drinking onset.
- People who drink ever-increasing amounts of alcohol, and who become irritable when they don't drink, are clearly at risk for alcoholism.
- Caucasians have the highest rate of alcohol disorders.
- These disorders are more common in men, and men are more likely to be binge drinkers (drinking five or more drinks on one occasion).
- Alcohol disorders are more prevalent in metropolitan areas.
- Alcohol disorders are more common in the more highly educated.
- We also know that there is a relationship between alcohol abuse and depression. The connection between alcohol misuse and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is becoming more clearly identified, but cause and effect is not yet fully understood.

Alcoholism and alcohol abuse are preventable. Only the tendency is inherited. Education, awareness of causes and outcomes of alcohol disorders, as well as early interventions when a problem is identified, are keys to success in preventing alcohol-related disorders, as well as effectively treating the problem.

Identifying the early signs of alcohol misuse

A few simple questions can help to determine if your alcohol use may be unhealthy. Ask:

- Am I drinking more than I used to?
- Once I start drinking, am I unable to stop?
- Do I get irritated when I am in a place where I can't drink?
- Do I continue to drink despite negative consequences?

Answering yes to even one of these questions suggests that your alcohol use may be problematic. Seek help.

If you answered no to the preceding questions, it may be that you do not have a problem. Not everyone who drinks regularly has a drinking problem. However, you should also strongly consider getting help if you:

- Drink to calm your nerves, forget your worries or reduce depression.
- Have lost interest in food.
- Gulp down your drinks fast.
- Lie or try to hide drinking habits.
- Drink alone more often.
- Hurt yourself or someone else because of drinking.
- Were drunk more than three or four times last year.
- Need alcohol to relieve anxiety or feel better.
- Feel irritable, resentful or unreasonable when you are not drinking.
- Have medical, social or financial problems caused by drinking.

Do not let myth stand in the way of seeking help. Alcoholism is a disease, no more a sign of weakness than asthma or diabetes. See your doctor.

Reach out for help in the community. Remember: The sooner a person gets help, the better the chances of preventing an escalating problem and for a full recovery.

Learn more and get support for alcoholism and alcohol abuse

- **Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)**
www.aa.org
- **Al-Anon Family Groups, including Alateen**
www.al-anon.org
- **National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)**
www.niaaa.nih.gov

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