



# Alcohol abuse treatment

**Relatively few people find it possible to quit drinking, stay sober, and get on with their lives without turning elsewhere for help. But for most problem drinkers, it's impossible to make the change without getting some kind of outside assistance.**

People abusing alcohol usually don't seek help until they encounter a major crisis like divorce or a suicidal depression.

Alcohol treatment programs use several methods, but they generally share the following goals:

- Reducing or eliminating alcohol use
- Improving functioning in such things as relationships, work, health, decision-making, moods and personal growth
- Preparing for possible lapses in sobriety.

Problem drinkers often do especially well when they combine treatments. The simultaneous use of therapy, medication and a support group, for example, has helped a lot of people attain sobriety and recovery.

## Major types of treatment

**Cognitive behavioral therapy** teaches people with alcohol problems to understand how their addiction happened, how it has affected them,

and how they can develop skills to overcome the problem. They learn how to become better communicators and problem-solvers. Therapists emphasize the value of homework so that patients can practice skills between sessions.

Together, therapists and patients identify the potential for relapse and determine how to avoid it or get back on track after a slip.

Sometimes, they're pushed into treatment by another person—a judge, for example—who offers a choice between counseling or jail time. When users of alcohol go into therapy under such conditions, their recovery may be less likely because they may not be ready to change their relationship with alcohol.

**Family therapy:** Alcoholism doesn't affect just those who are using substances. Family therapy makes it possible for family members to air grievances, overcome anger and fear, and work together to create a future with more openness, honesty, mutual care, cooperation, and optimism. In order for it to work however, it's best if all family members attend.

Family members may benefit from attending meetings of Al-Anon, a support group for concerned relatives and friends of people with drinking problems. Al-Anon brings together people who understand the pain and frustration of being involved with (or related to) someone abusing alcohol. Al-Anon members stress that only one person is responsible for alcohol abuse: the individual using the substance.

**Medications** to address alcohol abuse can help in several ways. Antabuse causes patients who take it to become violently ill if they drink alcohol (and requires careful monitoring); benzodiazepines reduce some withdrawal symptoms. Other medications address patients' psychological symptoms.

**Support groups:** Group therapy led by an addictions counselor or other mental health professional, and support groups spawned by such organizations as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), can be very helpful when you're trying to stop drinking. Those abusing alcohol draw strength from sharing their experiences with others who've been through it too. Participants don't judge, but they also don't accept denial.

## Settings for treatment

**Inpatient hospitalization and detoxification** provides around-the-clock professional care and treatment. Staff members help people abusing alcohol get through the period of withdrawal both physically and psychologically. Such treatment is intense but brief, getting the patient through the critical early period of detoxification. Long-term sobriety and mental health become the focus of subsequent treatment.

**Residential treatment facilities offer treatment** in a live-in facility with 24-hour staffing, general supervision and a supportive environment. There are different levels of residential treatment, some offer medical management while others may not. Residential treatment does not provide long-term medical or psychiatric help, it does provide a safe and supervised setting prior to transitioning to living independently while receiving outpatient therapy.

A person in **intensive outpatient treatment** (sometimes also called day treatment or partial hospitalization) spends most of the day at the facility, taking part in therapeutic and educational activities and going home at night. This treatment format provides more individualized care while preparing the patient to live an independent life again.

**Outpatient treatment** gives patients maximum independence while still monitoring their progress. They might meet with their therapist for an hour each week, but might participate in group and family therapy as well.

As patients progress to settings of treatment that allow for greater autonomy, their self-esteem can rebound, helping them to begin a more normal life. Unfortunately, some patients may choose to discontinue treatment before they're ready, putting themselves and their recovery at risk.

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