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Alcohol Abuse

Overview

How can I tell if alcohol is a problem for me?

Alcohol is a problem if it affects any part of your life, including your health, your work and your life at home. You may have a problem with alcohol if you think about drinking all the time, if you keep trying to quit on your own but can't, or if you often drink more than you plan to or more than is safe for what you are doing (such as driving a car).

What are some of the signs that alcohol is a problem?

Not all signs are obvious. Many people find it hard to admit when alcohol is a problem. Often, people around you may see your problem before you do. Think about what your friends and family say to you about drinking. Then talk with your family doctor about your concerns.

Symptoms

Am I drinking too much?

You are drinking too much if one of the following statements is true. You are:

- A woman who has more than 7 drinks* per week or more than 3 drinks per occasion
- A man who has more than 14 drinks* per week or more than 4 drinks per occasion
- Older than 65 years of age and have more than 7 drinks* per week or more than 3 drinks per occasion

**One drink = one 12-oz bottle of beer (4.5 percent alcohol), one 5-oz glass of wine (12.9 percent alcohol) or 1.5 oz of 80-proof distilled spirits.*

Am I drinking heavily?

You are drinking heavily if one of the following statements is true. You are:

- A woman who has more than 3 drinks every day or 21 drinks per week
- A man who has more than 5 drinks every day or 35 drinks per week

Am I taking risks with alcohol?

You are taking risks with alcohol if one or more of the following statements are true. You:

- Drink and drive, operate machinery or mix alcohol with over-the-counter or prescription medicine
- Don't tell your doctor or pharmacist that you are a regular drinker
- Are pregnant or are trying to become pregnant and drink at all (even small amounts of alcohol may hurt an unborn child)
- Drink alcohol while you are looking after children

- Drink alcohol even though you have a medical condition that can be made worse by drinking

Has my drinking become a habit?

Your drinking has become a habit if you drink regularly to:

- Relax, relieve anxiety or go to sleep
- Be more comfortable in social situations
- Avoid thinking about sad or unpleasant things
- Socialize with other regular drinkers

Has drinking alcohol become a problem for me?

Alcohol has become a problem for you if one or more of the following statements are true. You:

- Can't stop drinking once you start
- Felt the need to cut down on your drinking
- Have tried to stop drinking for a week or so but only quit for a few days
- Fail to do what you should at work or at home because of drinking
- Feel guilty after drinking
- Find other people make comments to you about your drinking
- Felt annoyed by criticism of your drinking
- Have a drink in the morning to get yourself going after drinking heavily the night before
- Can't remember what happened while you were drinking
- Have hurt someone else as a result of your drinking

Is alcohol taking over my life?

Yes, if you:

- Ever worry about having enough alcohol for an evening or weekend
- Hide alcohol or buy it at different stores so people will not know how much you are drinking
- Switch from one kind of drink to another hoping that this will keep you from drinking too much or getting drunk
- Try to get "extra" drinks at a social event or sneak drinks when others aren't looking

Other Signs That Alcohol Is a Problem

- Accidents
- Anxiety
- Being unusually suspicious
- Blackouts/memory loss
- Breakdown of relationships
- Depression
- Getting driving tickets while under the influence of alcohol
- Insomnia
- Loss of self-esteem
- Not taking care of yourself
- Poor work performance
- Taking sick days for hangovers
- Trembling hands

- Trouble having erections (men)
- Vomiting

Causes & Risk Factors

What causes alcoholism?

The causes of alcoholism are not fully known. A history of alcoholism in your family makes it more likely. Men seem to be more at risk than women. Some drinkers use alcohol to try to relieve anxiety, depression, tension, loneliness, self-doubt or unhappiness.

Treatment

Why should I quit?

Quitting is the only way to stop the problems alcohol is causing in your life. It may not be easy to quit. But your efforts will be rewarded by better health, better relationships and a sense of accomplishment. As you think about quitting, you may want to make a list of your reasons to quit.

What do I need to know about alcohol abuse treatment and recovery?

The decision to stop using alcohol or other drugs is very important to your health. Talk with your doctor if you've decided to quit. He or she can guide your treatment, help you find support and monitor your condition as you recover.

How do I stop?

The first step is realizing that you control your own behavior. It's the only real control you have in your life. So use it. Here are the next steps:

- **Commit to quitting.** Once you decide to quit, you can make plans to be sure you succeed.
- **Get help from your doctor.** He or she can be your biggest ally. Alcoholism is a kind of disease, and it can be treated. Talking with your doctor or a counselor about your problems can be helpful too.
- **Get support.** Contact Alcoholics Anonymous, the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence or the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. Call for information about local treatment programs and to speak to someone about your alcohol problem. They will give you the tools and support you need to quit. Ask your family and friends for support too.

What does it feel like to quit drinking?

As you drink, your body tries to make up for the depressant effects of alcohol. This built-up tolerance to alcohol can lead to severe withdrawal symptoms when people who drink a lot quit. Serious withdrawal symptoms include seeing things, seizures and delirium tremens (confusion, seeing vivid images, severe shakes, being very suspicious), and can even include death. This is why you need your doctor's care if you've been drinking heavily and are trying to quit.

Complications

How does alcohol affect my health?

Alcohol has many effects on your health. It can cause [cirrhosis](#), a disease of the liver. It's a major cause of deaths and injuries because of accidents. It can have severe effects on a baby during pregnancy. It can also cause stomach pain due to a bleeding ulcer or irritated stomach lining.

What other things can alcohol do to my body?

Alcohol can:

- Make you gain weight
- Make you feel sick or dizzy
- Give you bad breath
- Make you clumsy
- Slur your speech
- Make your skin break out
- Make you feel out of control

Other Organizations

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- How is alcohol affecting my health?
- What is considered problem drinking?
- How can an alcohol problem be treated?
- I'm pregnant. How can alcohol affect my baby?
- Can I take pain medication while I'm being treated for alcohol dependence?
- Can I take an antidepressant while I'm being treated for alcohol dependence?
- Can you recommend a support group to help me with my recovery?
- Are there medicines that can help alcohol dependence?
- What will alcohol withdrawal be like?
- What can I do to ease symptoms of alcohol withdrawal?

References

1. Problem Drinking and Alcoholism: Diagnosis and Treatment by MA Enoch, M.D., M.R.C.G.P. and D Goldman, M.D. (02/01/02, <http://www.aafp.org/afp/20020201/441.html>)