



Alcoholism

Alcoholism is a chronic, progressive and often-fatal disease. The condition involves a preoccupation with alcohol and impaired control over alcohol intake. One may continue to abuse alcohol despite serious adverse health, personal, work-related and financial consequences. Alcoholism involves physical dependence on the drug alcohol, but genetic, psychological, and social factors contribute to an addiction.

One may have a problem with alcohol but not all the characteristics of alcoholism. Instead, the problems may demonstrate "alcohol abuse." This means engagement in excessive drinking that results in health or social problems, but not dependent on alcohol and haven't fully lost control over the use of alcohol.

According to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, about 14 million Americans abuse alcohol. Each year more than 100,000 Americans die of alcohol-related causes. Alcoholism is one of the most common preventable causes of death among Americans.

Alcoholism and alcohol abuse cause major social, economic, and public health problems in the United States. The annual cost of lost productivity and health expenses related to alcoholism is more than \$150 billion.

Signs and Symptoms

Most alcoholics deny that they have a drinking problem. Signs of alcoholism and alcohol abuse include:

- Drinking alone or in secret
- Not remembering conversations or commitments
- Making a ritual of having drinks before, with, or after dinner and becoming annoyed when this ritual is disturbed or questioned
- Losing interest in activities and hobbies that used to bring pleasure
- Irritability as usual drinking time nears, especially if alcohol isn't available
- Keeping alcohol in unlikely places at home, at work, or in the car
- Gulping drinks, ordering doubles, becoming intoxicated intentionally to feel good or drinking to feel "normal"
- Having legal problems or problems with relationships, employment, or finances

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INFORMATION IS
AVAILABLE AT
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Causes

Alcohol addiction - physical dependence on alcohol - occurs over time as drinking alcohol alters the balance of some chemicals in the brain, causing a strong desire for more alcohol. These chemicals include gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), which inhibits impulsiveness; glutamate, which excites the nervous system; norepinephrine, which is released in response to stress; and dopamine, serotonin and opioid peptides, which are responsible for pleasurable feelings. Excessive, long-term drinking can deplete or increase the levels of some of these chemicals, causing the body to crave alcohol to restore good feelings or to avoid negative feelings.

To develop alcohol addiction, other factors that lead to excessive drinking contribute to the addiction process. These include:

- **Genetics.** Your genetic makeup doesn't cause alcoholism. But, if you have an imbalance of brain chemicals, you may be more predisposed to alcoholism.
- **Emotional state.** High levels of stress, anxiety or emotional pain can lead some people to drink alcohol to block out the turmoil.
- **Psychological factors.** Having friends or a close partner who drinks regularly but who may not abuse alcohol could lead to excessive drinking on your part. It may be difficult for you to distance yourself from these "enablers" or at least from their drinking habits.
- **Social and cultural factors.** The glamorous way that drinking alcohol is portrayed in advertising and in the entertainment media sends many people messages that it's OK to drink excessively.

Risk Factors

Steady drinking over time can produce a physical dependence on alcohol. However, drinking by itself is just one of the risk factors that contribute to alcoholism. Other risk factors include:

- **Age.** People who begin drinking at an early age — in their teens or earlier — are at a higher risk of becoming an alcoholic.
- **Genetics.** Genetic makeup may cause imbalances in one or more of several brain chemicals and increase your risk of alcohol dependency.
- **Gender.** Men are more likely to become alcoholics than are women, but the incidence of alcoholism among women has increased in the past 30 years.
- **Family history.** The risk of alcoholism is higher for people who had a parent or parents who abused alcohol. This is true even if you're adopted and your adoptive parents don't drink alcohol.
- **Emotional disorders.** Being severely depressed or having anxiety places you at a greater risk of abusing alcohol.

When to Seek Treatment

Because denial is nearly always a characteristic of alcoholism, it's unlikely that people who are alcoholic or who abuse alcohol will seek treatment on their own. Often it takes family members, friends or co-workers to persuade someone to undergo screening for alcoholism or to seek treatment.

Screening and Diagnosis

It's often difficult for doctors to screen for people who may have an alcohol problem and to recognize symptoms of alcoholism. For example, symptoms such as memory loss or falling might be the result of aging rather than indications of alcohol abuse. Because alcoholism involves denial, people may complain to doctors about digestive problems or pain or weakness, but never reveal their abuse of alcohol.

A doctor who suspects an alcohol problem may ask a number of questions regarding drinking habits in order to get an indication of the level of drinking. If answers to those questions indicate possible alcoholism or alcohol abuse, the doctor may perform a short screening test using a standardized questionnaire. Referral to a provider that specializes in the treatment of addictions would be the likely result of the doctor making a determination that the individual most likely has a drinking problem.

Complications

Alcohol depresses the central nervous system by acting as a sedative. In some people, the initial reaction may be stimulation, but as drinking continues, sedating or calming effects occur. By depressing the control centers of the brain, alcohol produces relaxation and reduces inhibitions. The more one drinks, the more they're sedated. Initially, alcohol affects areas of thought, emotion, and judgment. In sufficient amounts, alcohol impairs speech and muscle coordination and produces sleep. Taken in large enough quantities, alcohol is a lethal poison — it can cause life-threatening coma by severely depressing the vital centers of the brain.

Excessive use of alcohol can produce several harmful effects on the brain and nervous system and cause fatigue, short-term memory loss, and weakness and paralysis of eye muscles. It can also have these other severe health effects:

- **Liver disorders.** Drinking heavily can cause hepatitis, an inflammation of the liver. Symptoms may include loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and tenderness, fever, yellowing of the skin (jaundice) and sometimes mental confusion.
- **Gastrointestinal problems.** Alcohol can result in inflammation of the lining of the stomach (gastritis), which can lead to tears in the upper part of the stomach and lower part of the esophagus.
- **Cardiovascular problems.** Excessive drinking can lead to high blood pressure and damage heart muscle (cardiomyopathy). These conditions can cause increased risk of heart failure or stroke.
- **Diabetes complications.** Alcohol prevents the release of glucose from the liver and can increase the risk of blood sugar falling too low (hypoglycemia). This is dangerous for those who have diabetes and are already taking insulin to lower their blood sugar level.
- **Sexual function and menstruation.** Alcohol abuse can cause erectile dysfunction in men. In women, it can interrupt menstruation.
- **Birth defects.** Excessive drinking during pregnancy may cause a child may be born with fetal alcohol syndrome. This condition results in birth defects including a small head, heart defects, a shortening of the eyelids, and various other abnormalities. As these children grow older, they may have various developmental disabilities.
- **Neurologic complications.** Excessive drinking can affect the nervous system, causing numbness of the hands and feet, disordered thinking and dementia.

Other complications of alcoholism and alcohol abuse may include:

- **Domestic abuse and divorce**
- **Poor performance at work or school**
- **Increased likelihood of motor vehicle fatalities**
- **Greater susceptibility to accidental injuries from other causes**
- **Higher incidence of suicide and murder**

Treatment

Most alcoholics and alcohol abusers enter treatment reluctantly because they deny the problem. They often must be pressured. Health or legal problems may prompt treatment. Intervention helps an alcoholic recognize and accept the need for treatment. If you're concerned about a friend or family member, discuss intervention with a professional.

A wide range of treatments is available to help people with alcohol problems. Treatment is tailored to the individual. It may involve an evaluation, a brief intervention, an outpatient program or counseling. The first step in treatment is to determine whether the person is alcohol dependent. If control has not been lost over the use of alcohol, treatment may involve reducing the drinking. If alcoholism is the problem, cutting back is ineffective and inappropriate, and abstinence must be a part of the treatment goal.

If one is not dependent on alcohol but is experiencing the adverse effects of drinking, the goal of treatment is to reduce alcohol-related problems, often by counseling or a brief intervention. A brief intervention usually involves alcohol-abuse specialists who can establish a specific treatment plan. Interventions may include goal setting, behavioral modification techniques, use of self-help manuals, counseling and follow-up care. This approach includes abstinence,

individual and group therapy, participation in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), educational lectures, family involvement, work assignments, with the use of counselors and multi-professional staff are common in most treatment programs.

For more information on this or any other mental health topic, contact:



Park Center is a private, nonprofit counseling and psychiatric center, offering a full continuum of behavioral healthcare including: outpatient, residential, addiction, home-based, managed care services and more. Our primary mission is to serve those most in need. This includes seriously emotionally disturbed children, adolescents, and seriously mentally ill adults.

Park Center remains committed to quality, cost-effective behavioral health care for people of all ages in Allen, Adams, and Wells counties in order to promote their mental health and well-being.

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