

# Alcohol Addiction



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#### Introduction

Alcohol is a drug. It is classed as a depressant, meaning that it slows down vital functions -resulting in slurred speech, unsteady movement, disturbed perceptions and an inability to react quickly. It affects the mind by reducing a person's ability to think rationally and distorts his or her judgment.

Although classified as a depressant, the amount of alcohol consumed determines the type of effect. Most people drink for the stimulant effect, such as a beer or glass of wine taken to "loosen up." But if a person consumes more than the body can handle, they then experience alcohol's depressant effect. They start to feel "stupid" or lose coordination and control. Alcohol overdose causes even more severe depressant effects (inability to feel pain, toxicity where the body vomits the poison, and finally unconsciousness or, worse, coma or death from severe toxic overdose). These reactions depend on how much is consumed and how quickly.

There are different kinds of alcohol. Ethyl alcohol (ethanol), the only alcohol used in beverages, is produced by the fermentation of grains and fruits. Fermenting is a chemical process whereby yeast acts upon certain ingredients in the food, creating alcohol. Fermented drinks, such as beer and wine, contain from 2% alcohol to 20% alcohol. Distilled drinks, or liquor, contain from 40% to 50% or more alcohol.

The usual alcohol content for each is:

- Beer 2–6% alcohol
- Cider 4–8% alcohol
- Wine 8–20% alcohol
- Tequila 40% alcohol
- Rum 40% or more alcohol
- Brandy 40% or more alcohol
- Gin 40–47% alcohol
- Whiskey 40–50% alcohol
- Vodka 40–50% alcohol
- Liqueurs 15–60% alcohol

#### Overview and Facts

Alcohol kills more teenagers than all other drugs combined. It is a factor in the three leading causes of death among 15- to 24-year-olds: accidents, homicides and suicides.

Youth who drink are 7.5 times more likely to use other illegal drugs and fifty times more likely to use cocaine than young people who never drink. One survey found that 32% of the heavy drinkers over 12 were also illegal drug users. Moreover, 39% of all traffic deaths involved alcohol in 2005 and 40% of violent crimes occur under the influence of alcohol.

#### Symptoms

Symptoms can be classified based on behaviors and physical outcomes that occur as a result of alcohol addiction.

Alcoholics may engage in the following behaviors:

- Drinking alone
- Drinking more to feel the effects of alcohol (having a high tolerance)
- Becoming violent or hostile when asked about drinking
- Neglecting to eat or eating poorly
- Neglecting personal hygiene
- Missing work or school because of drinking
- Being unable to control alcohol intake
- Making excuses to drink
- Continuing to drink even when legal, social, or economic problems develop

People with alcoholism may also experience the following physical symptoms:

- Alcohol cravings
- Withdrawal symptoms if drinking is stopped, including shaking, nausea, and vomiting
- Tremors in the morning after drinking
- Lapses in memory (blacking out) after a night of drinking
- Illnesses, such as alcoholic ketoacidosis (includes dehydration-type symptoms) or cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver.

### Diagnosis

As defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the diagnosis of alcoholism (formerly referred to as alcohol dependence and currently known as alcohol use disorder) can be made when it is determined that a negative pattern of alcohol use leading to a number of problems has been established. Those problems can include needing more alcohol to get intoxicated (tolerance), difficulties that occur when the effects of alcohol wear off (withdrawal), using more alcohol or for longer time than intended, and other life problems because of the use of alcohol.

Five stages of alcohol and drug use have been identified. The first stage is described as access to alcohol rather than use of alcohol, tobacco, inhalants, or other drugs. In that stage, minimizing the risk factors that make a teenager more vulnerable to using alcohol are an issue. The second stage of alcohol and other drug use ranges from experimentation or occasional use to regular weekly use of alcohol, tobacco, inhalants, or other drugs. The third stage is characterized by youths further increasing the frequency of alcohol use and/or using alcohol and other drugs on a regular basis. This stage may also include the teenager buying alcohol or other drugs or stealing to get their drug of choice. In the fourth stage of alcohol and drug use, adolescents have established regular usage, have become preoccupied with getting intoxicated ("high"), and have developed problems in their social, educational, vocational, or family life as a result of using the substance. The final and most serious fifth stage of alcohol or other drug use is defined by the youth only feeling normal when they are using. During this stage, risk-taking behaviors like stealing, engaging in physical fights, or driving under the influence of alcohol increase, and they become most vulnerable to having suicidal thoughts.

### Causes and Risk Factors

The cause of alcoholism is still unknown. However, dependency on alcohol develops when you drink so much alcohol that chemical changes in the brain occur. These changes emphasize the pleasurable feelings that result when you drink alcohol.

These feelings cause an increased desire to drink, even if it causes harm. Alcoholism typically develops gradually over time. Although the exact cause of alcoholism is unknown, there are certain factors that may place you at higher risk for developing this disease.

Known risk factors for alcoholism include having:

- more than 15 drinks a week if you are male
- more than 12 drinks a week if you are female
- more than five drinks per occasion at least once a week (binge drinking)
- a parent with alcoholism
- a mental health problem, such as depression, anxiety, or schizophrenia

You may also be at a greater risk for alcoholism if you:

- are a young adult experiencing peer pressure
- have low self-esteem
- experience a high level of stress
- live in a family or culture where alcohol use is common and accepted

### Treatment

Treatment for alcoholism involves a number of supports that are aimed at helping you refrain from drinking altogether (abstinence). Treatment may occur in stages and can include the following:

- detoxification or withdrawal to rid your body of alcohol
- rehabilitation to learn new coping skills and behaviors
- counseling to address emotional problems that may prompt you to drink
- support, including 12-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous
- medical treatment for health problems associated with alcoholism
- medications to help control addiction

There are a couple of different medications that may help with alcohol addiction.

- Naltrexone is used only after an individual has detoxed from alcohol. This type of drug works by blocking certain receptors in the brain that are associated with the alcoholic “high.” This drug, in combination with counseling, may help to decrease an individual’s craving for alcohol.
- Acamprostate is a medication that can help to re-establish the brain’s original chemical state before alcohol dependence. This drug should also be used in conjunction with therapy.
- Disulfiram is a drug that causes physical discomfort (nausea, vomiting, headaches) any time the individual consumes alcohol.

If your addiction to alcohol is severe, you may need to seek treatment at an inpatient facility. These facilities will provide you with 24-hour care as you withdraw from alcohol and recover from your addiction. Once you are well enough to leave, you will need to continue to receive treatment on an outpatient basis.

There are numerous individual treatments for alcoholism. Relapse prevention uses methods for recognizing and amending problem behaviors. Individualized drug counseling specifically emphasizes short-term behavioral goals in an attempt to help the individual reduce or stop the use of alcohol altogether. Cognitive therapy techniques, like helping the patient recognize what tends to precede and follow their episodes of alcohol use, are often used

to address alcohol abuse. Some treatment programs include drug testing. Twelve-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous are individualized drug-counseling methods. Motivational enhancement therapy encourages the teen to increase their desire to participate in therapy. Stimulus control refers to a treatment method that teaches the person to stay away from situations that are associated with alcohol use and to replace those situations with activities that are contrary to using drugs. Urge control is an approach to changing patterns that lead to drug use. Social control involves family members and other significant others of the alcoholic in treatment.

### **Sources**

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