

Alcohol

What to do if it's a problem for you

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

Alcohol is a problem for you if it causes a problem in any part of your life. This includes 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 drink more than you plan to. You may plan to have only a couple of drinks with dinner and end up drinking for the rest of the night.

Signs that alcohol is a problem

- Accidents
- Anxiety
- Being unusually suspicious
- Blackouts/memory loss
- Breakdown of relationships, such as divorce
- Depression
- Driving offenses
- Easily annoyed
- Insomnia
- Loss of self-esteem
- Not taking care of yourself
- Poor work performance
- Taking sick days for hangovers
- Trembling hands
- Trouble having erections in men

Many people think only of a “skid-row bum” when they think of someone with an alcohol problem. The bum is the end stage of alcohol problems, when a person has lost his or her family, job and health to alcohol. You don't reach this stage overnight. You may see less obvious changes along the way, beginning with drinking more than you intended, more than is safe for what you are doing (like driving a car) or more than is safe for your health.

Many people find it hard to admit when alcohol is a problem. Often, those around you may see alcohol as a problem for you while you don't see the problems it's causing. Think about the things mentioned here. Think about what your friends and family say to you about drinking. Then talk with your family doctor about your concerns.

How to tell if alcohol is a problem

An easy way to tell if alcohol is a problem for you is to answer the “CAGE” questions. If you answer yes to one of the questions, you may have a problem. If you answer yes to two or more of them, you may have alcoholism.

Have you ever felt:

- The need to **C**ut down your drinking?
- **A**nnoyed by criticism of your drinking?
- **G**uilty about your drinking?
- As if you need an **E**ye-opener in the morning?

How does alcohol affect my health?

Alcohol is best known as a cause of *cirrhosis*, a disease of the liver. However, it has many other effects on health. It’s a major cause of deaths and injuries due to accidents. It can have severe effects on a baby during pregnancy. It’s also often the cause of stomach pain due to a bleeding ulcer or irritated stomach lining (*gastritis*).

What causes alcoholism?

The causes of alcoholism are not fully known. A history of alcoholism in your family makes it more likely. Males seem to be more at risk than women. Some experts say that drinkers use alcohol to “self-medicate” themselves. This means that alcohol is used to try to relieve anxiety, depression, tension, loneliness, self-doubt or unhappiness.

More than one of these theories probably plays a role in alcoholism. For example, a family history of alcoholism may combine with stress, a person’s environment and personality to cause alcoholism.

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 may result in extreme shakiness when the alcohol begins to wear off. This can lead to severe withdrawal symptoms in people who drink a lot.

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 may need medical care if you’ve been drinking heavily and are trying to quit.

What happens when I quit?

If you've been drinking heavily for quite some time, you may need to go through *detoxification*. In detoxification, you'll get the help you need to get you through withdrawal. Your doctor may prescribe medicine for you for a short while to make the process a little easier and safer.

You may also get support through counseling to help you with your recovery. People who counsel people with drinking problems are often recovering from drinking problems of their own, so they can offer a personal view.

Part of recovery also involves rebuilding relationships. You may be surprised at the support you get from your friends and family.

Many other sources of support are also available to you, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). AA is a free self-help group run by nondrinking alcoholics to help themselves and others.

Can medicines help me?

Two medicines may help. A drug called disulfiram (also called Antabuse) may help you avoid alcohol. But it's not a cure. You start taking disulfiram after you have stopped drinking for three days. If you drink while taking the medicine, you'll have a severe reaction, such as flushing, vomiting and severe headache. Naltrexone (ReVia) can also help you quit drinking by blocking your ability to enjoy alcohol. It may help you stop drinking and keep you from drinking again. Naltrexone doesn't help everyone, though, and its effect is only a modest improvement over treatment without it. If you don't follow your doctor's instruction correctly, naltrexone can damage your liver or cause it to completely shut down.

Must alcoholics quit drinking altogether?

It's always important not to drink at all if you've had a problem with alcohol. It's too easy to get back into old patterns if you drink again.



For more information about alcohol problems, contact a local chapter of AA (look in your phone book for the number), or call the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence Helpline at 800-475-HOPE.

If you're worried about the drinking of a friend or family member, a group called Al-Anon may be able to help you. For more information about Al-Anon, call 800-356-9996. For information about Al-Anon meetings, call 800-344-2666.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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