

Facts

For most people who drink, alcohol is a pleasant accompaniment to social activities. Moderate alcohol use —up to 2 drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women or older people— is not harmful for most adults. Nonetheless, a large number of people get into serious trouble because of their drinking. Nearly 14 million Americans —1 in every 13 adults— abuse alcohol or are alcoholic. Many more adults engage in risky drinking that could lead to alcohol problems, including binge drinking or heavy drinking on a regular basis. In addition, 53 percent of people in the U.S. report that one or more of their close relatives have a drinking problem.

The consequences of alcohol misuse are serious— in many cases, life threatening. Heavy drinking can increase the risk of some kinds of cancer, cause liver cirrhosis, problems with the immune system, and harm the fetus during pregnancy. Drinking increases the risk of accidents and injuries. In addition, suicides and homicides are most likely to be committed by persons who have been drinking.

In economic terms, alcohol related problems cost society approximately \$185 billion per year. In human terms, the costs cannot be calculated.

Signs and Symptoms

Alcoholism

Alcoholism, also known as “alcohol dependence,” is a disease that includes four symptoms:

1. **Craving:** A strong need, or compulsion to drink.
2. **Loss of Control:** The inability to limit one’s drinking on any given occasion.
3. **Physical Dependence:** Withdrawal symptoms such as nausea, sweating, shakiness, and anxiety occur when alcohol use is stopped after a period of heavy drinking.
4. **Tolerance:** The need to drink greater amounts of alcohol in order to “get high.”

Some people do not understand why an alcoholic can’t “just use a little willpower” to stop drinking. Alcoholism has little to do with willpower. Alcoholics are in the grip of a powerful uncontrollable need for alcohol that overrides their ability to stop drinking. In order to stop drinking, people with alcoholism need to seek assistance. With treatment and support, many individuals are able to stop drinking and rebuild their lives.

Alcohol Abuse

Alcohol abuse differs from alcoholism in that it does not include an extremely strong craving for alcohol, loss of control over drinking or physical dependence. Alcohol abuse is a defined pattern of drinking that results in one or more of the following within a 12-month period:

- Failure to fulfill major work, school, or home responsibilities;
- Drinking in situations that are physically dangerous, such as while driving or operating machinery;
- Having recurring alcohol-related legal problems, such as being arrested for drunk driving or for physically hurting someone while drunk; and
- Continued drinking despite having ongoing relationship problems that are caused or worsened by drinking.

Although alcohol abuse is basically different from alcoholism, many effects of alcohol abuse are also experienced by alcoholics.

What Are the Signs of a Problem?

Answering the following questions can help tell you whether you may have a drinking problem:

1. Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?
2. Have people annoyed you by criticizing your drinking?
3. Have you ever felt bad or guilty about your drinking?
4. Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning (as an “eye-opener”) to steady you or get rid of a hangover?

One “yes” answer suggests a possible alcohol problem. More than one “yes” indicates a high likelihood that a problem exists. In either case, it is important that you see your physician or other health care provider right away to discuss your answers. They can help you determine whether you have a drinking problem and help with a course of action. Even if you answered “no” to all of the above questions, if you have drinking-related problems affecting your work, relationships, health, or the law, you should seek professional help. The effects of alcohol abuse can be extremely serious, even fatal, both to you and to others.

Serving people in Crawford, Grand Traverse, Leelanau, Missaukee, Roscommon and Wexford Counties.

Causes

Many people wonder why some individuals can use alcohol without problems but others cannot. One important reason has to do with genetics. Scientists have found that having an alcoholic family member makes it more likely that if you choose to drink, you too may develop alcoholism. Genes, however, are not the whole story. In fact, scientists now believe that certain factors in the environment influence whether a person with a genetic risk for alcoholism ever develops the disease. A person's risk for developing alcoholism can increase based on the person's environment, including where and how he or she lives; family, friends, and culture; peer pressure, and even how easy it is to get alcohol.

Helping Yourself

Accepting the fact that help is needed for an alcohol problem may not be easy. Keep in mind that the sooner you get help, the better your chances are for a successful recovery.

Any concerns you may have about discussing drinking-related problems with others may stem from common misconceptions about alcoholism. The myth prevails that an alcohol problem is a moral weakness. As a result, you may feel that to seek help is to admit some shameful defect in yourself. In fact, alcoholism is a disease that is no more a sign of weakness than is asthma. Moreover, taking steps to identify a possible drinking problem has an enormous payoff— a chance for a healthier, more rewarding life.

When you visit your health care provider, you will be asked a number of questions. Try to answer as fully and honestly as you can. You will also be given a physical exam. If your health care provider concludes that you may be dependent on alcohol, you may be referred to see a specialist in treating alcoholism. You should be involved in any decisions and have all treatment choices explained to you.

Alcoholism Treatment

The type of treatment that you receive depends on the severity of your alcoholism and the resources that are available in your community. Treatment may include detoxification (the process of getting the alcohol out of your system); taking doctor-prescribed medications such as Antabuse or ReVia, to help prevent a relapse once drinking has stopped; and individual/group counseling. Counseling helps to teach alcoholics ways in which they can identify situations and feelings that trigger the urge to drink and to find new ways to cope that do not include alcohol use. Treatments are often provided on an outpatient basis.

Support of family members is important to the recovery process. Many programs offer brief marital and family counseling as part of the treatment process. Programs may also link individuals with important community resources, such as legal assistance, job training, childcare, and parenting classes.

Virtually all treatment of alcoholism includes Alcoholics

Anonymous meetings. "AA" is an effective mutual help program for recovering alcoholics. Not everyone responds to "AA" and its message, and other recovery approaches are available. It is important to recognize that although alcoholism can be treated, it cannot be cured.

Help for Alcohol Abuse

If your health care provider determines that you are not alcohol dependent, yet are involved in a pattern of alcohol abuse, there are steps you can take:

- Examine the benefits of stopping an unhealthy drinking pattern.
- Set a drinking goal for yourself – be it abstaining or limiting the amount you drink.
- Examine the situations that trigger your unhealthy drinking and develop new ways of handling those situations.

Some people choose to attend AA meetings for information and support.

Sources:

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)

For more information contact

Northern Michigan Substance Abuse Services
1-800-686-0749
(989) 732-1791

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc.
(757) 563-1600
www.al-anon.alateen.org

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) World Services, Inc.
(212) 870-3400
www.aa.org

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc. (NCADD)
(212) 269-7797
1-800-NCA-CALL
www.ncadd.org

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)
(301) 443-3860
www.niaaa.nih.gov