

# Alcohol abuse

Family Health Center  
606 N Third Avenue Suite #101 - Sandpoint, Idaho 83864 - Telephone (208) 263-1435

## What is it?

Alcohol abuse is a complex problem with elements of medical illness, dependency, and a learned behavioral disorder. It ranges from the social drinker with a tendency to occasionally use alcohol in excess to the constantly intoxicated skid-row bum. The two main features are loss of control and dishonesty. It is progressive and potentially fatal.

## What causes it?

The causes of alcoholism are not fully known. Some experts say that drinkers use alcohol to "self medicate". This means that alcohol is used to relieve anxiety, depression, tension, loneliness, self-doubt, or unhappiness. There is probably more than one explanation for most people. For example, a family history of alcoholism may combine with stress, environment, and personality to cause alcohol abuse.

## Who gets it?

Anyone can become addicted to the use of alcohol. Men seem to be more at risk than women. Family history of alcoholism makes it much more likely. It is estimated that 9 - 10 million adults and 3.3 million youths in the United States have drinking or alcohol related problems. Nevertheless, most problem drinkers are employed, employable, or in families indicating that the scope of the problem extends far beyond the "skid-row bum," who accounts for only 5% of patients.

## Is alcohol a problem for you?

Alcohol is a problem for you if it causes a problem in any part of your life. This includes your health, your work, your life at home, and your status with the law.

You also 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.

## Signs that alcohol is a problem

- Accidents
- Blackouts, memory loss
- Depression
- Divorce
- Driving offenses
- Insomnia
- Loss of self esteem
- Poor work performance
- Trembling hands
- Trouble having erections in men

Many people think of a skid-row bum when they think of someone with an alcohol problem. You don't reach this stage overnight. You may see less obvious changes along the way, beginning with drinking more than you intend, more than what is safe for what you are doing like driving a car, or more than what is safe for your health.

An easy way to tell if alcohol is a problem for you is to answer the questions in the CAGE questionnaire below. 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 are abusing alcohol.

## Have you ever felt:

The need to **C**ut down on 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?

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

## What are the symptoms?

Alcohol is best known as the cause of *cirrhosis*, a disease of the liver. However, it has many other effects on health. It's a major cause of death and injury due to accidents. It can have severe effects on a baby during pregnancy. It's also the cause of stomach pain due to a bleeding ulcer or irritated stomach lining (*gastritis*). It can raise blood pressure and cause sleep disturbances.

As you drink, your body tries to make up for the depression effect of alcohol. This built up tolerance to alcohol may result in withdrawal symptoms when the alcohol begins to wear off.

Serious withdrawal symptoms include visual disturbances, seizures, and *delirium tremens* (confusion, seeing vivid images, severe shakes, being very suspicious), and even death. This is why you may need medical care if you've been drinking heavily and are trying to quit. Your doctor may prescribe medicine for a short time to make the process a little easier and safer.

## Can it be treated?

Therapy can be classified as biological, psychological, behavioral, or cultural. Selection is best done on an individual basis to meet specific needs.

- **Alcoholics Anonymous** (AA) combines most other forms of treatment into one program and is best for those who want to commit themselves to the total program as a way of life. It provides social support, caring, and structure. AA has the best success rate for long term control of alcohol abuse. The person willing to dedicate himself to a lifetime of sobriety can achieve the goal in this carefully monitored environment. To locate a local meeting call 800-326-2164.

- **Cultural treatment** emphasizes altering external factors; it includes residential care, halfway houses, and direct social manipulation, such as finding jobs, helping with shelter and money, and removing a person from his family. This is a treatment appropriate for homeless, jobless, unstable persons, and others with severe family problems.

- **Alcohol inpatient programs** attempt to achieve detoxification and total abstinence using drug therapy and a variety of psychological and social therapies. They typically involve a minimum stay of 28 days. This program is suited to people who can afford to be taken out of their social or work environments for prolonged periods, with whom all other forms of treatment have failed, and who will not deal with the problem so long as their environment maintains destructive drinking.

- **Disulfuram** (Antabuse) is a drug which may help you to avoid alcohol, but it's not a cure. If you drink while taking the medicine, you'll have bad reactions, like flushing, vomiting, and severe headache. Symptoms last about 90 minutes and are usually self-limited. The drug can worsen depression and for most people it

provides no more than short term improvement in alcohol consumption.

- **Naltrexone** (Revia) is approved for treating alcohol dependence as part of a comprehensive treatment program. It works by decreasing craving. Possible side effects include nausea, headache, dizziness, and joint aches. It is generally safe and effective, but very expensive - approximately \$150 per month. Possible side effects include nausea, headache, dizziness and joint aches.

## Are there complications?

There are many serious medical complications of continued alcohol abuse, including *encephalopathy* (disease of the brain), dementia, tuberculosis, cirrhosis, alcoholic hepatitis, fatty liver, gastritis, oral cancer, pancreatitis, and heart muscle disease. In addition, impotence and loss of *libido* (sex drive) may result from impaired testosterone synthesis in heavy drinkers. *Fetal alcohol syndrome* occurs in infants born to mothers who drink heavily during pregnancy.

However, perhaps even more destructive is the effect that alcohol abusers have on their families, friends, and coworkers. Heavy alcohol use often interferes with ability to maintain marriages, provide stable parental role models, and function in daily workplace demands. In addition alcohol abusers often have legal troubles and medical complications requiring separation from family. In recent years there has been an increase in the rare but fatal complication of alcohol toxicity which slows breathing down to the point where a person stops suffocates.

## In summary

- Alcohol abuse can happen to anyone.
- Alcohol is a problem for you if it causes a problem in any part of your life.
- An easy way to tell if alcohol is a problem is to answer the CAGE questionnaire.
- The first step in recovery is admitting that you have a problem.
- For more information about alcohol abuse, call the national council on alcoholism and drug dependence helpline 1-800-475-HOPE.
- Ask your doctor if you have any questions.