

# Alcohol Abuse and Dependence Information, Adult

Alcohol is a widely available drug. People drink alcohol in different amounts. People who drink alcohol very often and in large amounts often have problems during and after drinking. They may develop what is called an alcohol use disorder. There are two main types of alcohol use disorders:

- Alcohol abuse. This is when you use alcohol too much or too often. You may use alcohol to make yourself feel happy or to reduce stress. You may have a hard time setting a limit on the amount you drink.
- Alcohol dependence. This is when you use alcohol consistently for a period of time, and your body changes as a result. This can make it hard to stop drinking because you may start to feel sick or feel different when you do not use alcohol. These symptoms are known as withdrawal.

## How can alcohol abuse and dependence affect me?

Alcohol abuse and dependence can have a negative effect on your life. Drinking too much can lead to addiction. You may feel like you need alcohol to function normally. You may drink alcohol before work in the morning, during the day, or as soon as you get home from work in the evening. These actions can result in:

- Poor work performance.
- Job loss.
- Financial problems.
- Car crashes or criminal charges from driving after drinking alcohol.
- Problems in your relationships with friends and family.
- Losing the trust and respect of coworkers, friends, and family.

Drinking heavily over a long period of time can permanently damage your body and brain, and can cause lifelong health issues, such as:

- Damage to your liver or pancreas.
- Heart problems, high blood pressure, or stroke.
- Certain cancers.
- Decreased ability to fight infections.
- Brain or nerve damage.
- Brain damage.
- Depression.
- Early (*premature*) death.

If you are careless or you crave alcohol, it is easy to drink more than your body can handle (overdose). Alcohol overdose is a serious situation that requires hospitalization. It may lead to permanent injuries or death.

## What can increase my risk?

- Having a family history of alcohol abuse.
- Having depression or other mental health conditions.
- Beginning to drink at an early age.
- Binge drinking often.

- Experiencing trauma, stress, and an unstable home life during childhood.
- Spending time with people who drink often.

## **What actions can I take to prevent or manage alcohol abuse and dependence?**

- **Do not** drink alcohol if:
  - Your health care provider tells you not to drink.
  - You are pregnant, may be pregnant, or are planning to become pregnant.
- If you drink alcohol:
  - Limit how much you use to:
    - 0–1 drink a day for women.
    - 0–2 drinks a day for men.
  - Be aware of how much alcohol is in your drink. In the U.S., one drink equals one 12 oz bottle of beer (355 mL), one 5 oz glass of wine (148 mL), or one 1½ oz glass of hard liquor (44 mL).
- Stop drinking if you have been drinking too much. This can be very hard to do if you are used to abusing alcohol. If you begin to have withdrawal symptoms, talk with your health care provider or a person that you trust. These symptoms may include anxiety, shaky hands, headache, nausea, sweating, or not being able to sleep.
- Choose to drink nonalcoholic beverages in social gatherings and places where there may be alcohol.

## **Activity**

- Spend more time on activities that you enjoy that do not involve alcohol, like hobbies or exercise.
- Find healthy ways to cope with stress, such as exercise, meditation, or spending time with people you care about.

## **General Information**

- Talk to your family, coworkers, and friends about supporting you in your efforts to stop drinking. If they drink, ask them not to drink around you. Spend more time with people who do not drink alcohol.
- If you think that you have an alcohol dependency problem:
  - Tell friends or family about your concerns.
  - Talk with your health care provider or another health professional about where to get help.
  - Work with a therapist and a chemical dependency counselor.
  - Consider joining a support group for people who struggle with alcohol abuse and dependence.

## **Where to find support**

- Your health care provider.
- SMART Recovery: [www.smartrecovery.org](http://www.smartrecovery.org)

## **Therapy and support groups**

- Local treatment centers or chemical dependency counselors.
- Local AA groups in your community: [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)



## Where to find more information

Learn more about alcohol abuse and dependence from:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: [www.niaaa.nih.gov](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov)
- Alcoholics Anonymous (AA): [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)

## Contact a health care provider if:

- You drink more or for longer than you intended, on more than one occasion.
- You tried to stop drinking or to cut back on how much you drink, but you were not able to.
- You often drink to the point of vomiting or passing out.
- You want to drink so badly that you cannot think about anything else.
- You have problems in your life due to drinking, but you continue to drink.
- You keep drinking even though you feel anxious, depressed, or have experienced memory loss.
- You have stopped doing the things you used to enjoy in order to drink.
- You have to drink more than you used to in order to get the effect you want.
- You experience anxiety, sweating, nausea, shakiness, and trouble sleeping when you try to stop drinking.

## Get help right away if:

- You have thoughts about hurting yourself or others.
- You have serious withdrawal symptoms, including:
  - Confusion
  - Racing heart.
  - High blood pressure
  - Fever

**If you ever feel like you may hurt yourself or others, or have thoughts about taking your own life, get help right away. You can go to your nearest emergency department or call:**

- Your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.).
- A suicide crisis helpline, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. This is open 24 hours a day.

## Summary

- Alcohol abuse and dependence can have a negative effect on your life. Drinking too much or too often can lead to addiction.
- If you drink alcohol, limit how much you use.
- If you feel you need help with changing your drinking habits, talk with your health care provider, a good friend, or a therapist, or go to an AA group.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.