

# Alcohol Use Disorder

Alcohol use disorder is when your drinking disrupts your daily life. When you have this condition, you drink too much alcohol and you cannot control your drinking.

Alcohol use disorder can cause serious problems with your physical health. It can affect your brain, heart, liver, pancreas, immune system, stomach, and intestines. Alcohol use disorder can increase your risk for certain cancers and cause problems with your mental health, such as depression, anxiety, psychosis, delirium, and dementia. People with this disorder risk hurting themselves and others.

## What are the causes?

This condition is caused by drinking too much alcohol over time. It is not caused by drinking too much alcohol only one or two times. Some people with this condition drink alcohol to cope with or escape from negative life events. Others drink to relieve pain or symptoms of mental illness.

## What increases the risk?

You are more likely to develop this condition if:

- You have a family history of alcohol use disorder.
- Your culture encourages drinking to the point of intoxication, or makes alcohol easy to get.
- You had a mood or conduct disorder in childhood.
- You have been a victim of abuse.
- You are an adolescent and:
  - You have poor grades or difficulties in school.
  - Your caregivers do not talk to you about saying no to alcohol, or supervise your activities.
  - You are impulsive or you have trouble with self-control.

## What are the signs or symptoms?

Symptoms of this condition include:

- Drinking more than you want to.
- Drinking for longer than you want to.
- Trying several times to drink less or to control your drinking.
- Spending a lot of time getting alcohol, drinking, or recovering from drinking.
- Craving alcohol.
- Having problems at work, at school, or at home due to drinking.
- Having problems in relationships due to drinking.
- Drinking when it is dangerous to drink, such as before driving a car.
- Continuing to drink even though you know you might have a physical or mental problem related to drinking.
- Needing more and more alcohol to get the same effect you want from the alcohol (building up *tolerance*).
- Having symptoms of withdrawal when you stop drinking. Symptoms of withdrawal include:
  - Fatigue.
  - Nightmares.
  - Trouble sleeping.
  - Depression.
  - Anxiety.
  - Fever.

- Seizures.
- Severe confusion.
- Feeling or seeing things that are not there (*hallucinations*).
- Tremors.
- Rapid heart rate.
- Rapid breathing.
- High blood pressure.
- Drinking to avoid symptoms of withdrawal.

## How is this diagnosed?

This condition is diagnosed with an assessment. Your health care provider may start the assessment by asking three or four questions about your drinking.

Your health care provider may perform a physical exam or do lab tests to see if you have physical problems resulting from alcohol use. She or he may refer you to a mental health professional for evaluation.

## How is this treated?

Some people with alcohol use disorder are able to reduce their alcohol use to low-risk levels. Others need to completely quit drinking alcohol. When necessary, mental health professionals with specialized training in substance use treatment can help. Your health care provider can help you decide how severe your alcohol use disorder is and what type of treatment you need. The following forms of treatment are available:



- Detoxification. Detoxification involves quitting drinking and using prescription medicines within the first week to help lessen withdrawal symptoms. This treatment is important for people who have had withdrawal symptoms before and for heavy drinkers who are likely to have withdrawal symptoms. Alcohol withdrawal can be dangerous, and in severe cases, it can cause death. Detoxification may be provided in a home, community, or primary care setting, or in a hospital or substance use treatment facility.
- Counseling. This treatment is also called talk therapy. It is provided by substance use treatment counselors. A counselor can address the reasons you use alcohol and suggest ways to keep you from drinking again or to prevent problem drinking. The goals of talk therapy are to:
  - Find healthy activities and ways for you to cope with stress.
  - Identify and avoid the things that trigger your alcohol use.
  - Help you learn how to handle cravings.
- Medicines. Medicines can help treat alcohol use disorder by:
  - Decreasing alcohol cravings.
  - Decreasing the positive feeling you have when you drink alcohol.
  - Causing an uncomfortable physical reaction when you drink alcohol (*aversion therapy*).
- Support groups. Support groups are led by people who have quit drinking. They provide emotional support, advice, and guidance.

These forms of treatment are often combined. Some people with this condition benefit from a combination of treatments provided by specialized substance use treatment centers.

## Follow these instructions at home:

- Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your health care provider.
- Check with your health care provider before starting any new medicines.

- Ask friends and family members not to offer you alcohol.
- Avoid situations where alcohol is served, including gatherings where others are drinking alcohol.
- Create a plan for what to do when you are tempted to use alcohol.
- Find hobbies or activities that you enjoy that do not include alcohol.
- Keep all follow-up visits as told by your health care provider. This is important.

### **How is this prevented?**

- If you drink, limit alcohol intake to no more than 1 drink a day for nonpregnant women and 2 drinks a day for men. One drink equals 12 oz of beer, 5 oz of wine, or 1½ oz of hard liquor.
- If you have a mental health condition, get treatment and support.
- **Do not** give alcohol to adolescents.
- If you are an adolescent:
  - **Do not** drink alcohol.
  - **Do not** be afraid to say no if someone offers you alcohol. Speak up about why you do not want to drink. You can be a positive role model for your friends and set a good example for those around you by not drinking alcohol.
  - If your friends drink, spend time with others who do not drink alcohol. Make new friends who do not use alcohol.
  - Find healthy ways to manage stress and emotions, such as meditation or deep breathing, exercise, spending time in nature, listening to music, or talking with a trusted friend or family member.

### **Contact a health care provider if:**

- You are not able to take your medicines as told.
- Your symptoms get worse.
- You return to drinking alcohol (*relapse*) and your symptoms get worse.

### **Get help right away if:**

- You have thoughts about hurting yourself or others.

**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 use disorder is when your drinking disrupts your daily life. When you have this condition, you drink too much alcohol and you cannot control your drinking.
- Treatment may include detoxification, counseling, medicine, and support groups.
- Ask friends and family members not to offer you alcohol. Avoid situations where alcohol is served.
- Get help right away if you have thoughts about hurting yourself or others.

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.