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What Is Alcoholism?

Differences between dependence and abuse.

Alcoholism is a lifelong illness. People with alcoholism, or alcohol dependence, have crave alcohol, and as their tolerance grows, they need to drink more to achieve the same "buzz." Alcohol is a drug.

In addition to **cravings** and **tolerance**, alcoholism includes these symptoms:

- **Loss of control.** A person cannot stop drinking once he or she has started.
- **Physical dependence.** Withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, shakiness, and anxiety, occur when alcohol use is stopped.

Is alcohol abuse different from alcoholism?

Yes, alcohol abuse is different from alcoholism, but it can be just as dangerous. People who abuse alcohol may drink too much alcohol at a time and drink too often. You may know someone who abuses alcohol who has problems at work, at home or with the law because of problem drinking. People who abuse alcohol may not be dependent on it and have alcoholism. But people who abuse alcohol have a higher risk of developing alcoholism.

For people who choose to drink, doctors usually recommend no more than one drink a day for women and no more than two drinks a day for men.

Does alcohol abuse cause the same problems as alcoholism?

A problem drinker or alcohol abuser may not be addicted to alcohol, but he or she shares many of the same health risks. Quality of life, in particular, can be severely lessened. In addition, alcoholics and alcohol abusers alike may bring havoc into the lives of their loved ones and on others around them.

Studies show that alcoholism and alcohol abuse are not only a leading cause of death but also a significant factor in violent crime, teen pregnancy, date rape and certain other types of crime.

How can I know if I have an alcohol problem?

Ask yourself the following questions. You may want to print this article so you can check off any symptoms you find in yourself.

In the past year, have you had times when:

You ended up drinking more or longer than you intended?	Y or N
More than once, you wanted to cut down or stop drinking, or tried to, but could not?	Y or N
More than once, you have been in situations while or after drinking that increased your chances of getting hurt (such as driving, swimming, using machinery, walking in a dangerous area or having unsafe sex)?	Y or N



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You had to drink much more than you once did to get the effect you want? Or found that your usual number of drinks had much less effect than before?	Y or N
You continued to drink even though it made you feel depressed or anxious or added to another health problem? Or after having had a memory blackout?	Y or N
You spent a lot of time drinking? Or being sick or getting over other after-effects?	Y or N
You continued to drink even though it was causing trouble with your family or friends?	Y or N
You found that drinking or being sick from drinking-often interfered with taking care of your home or family? Or caused job troubles or school problems?	Y or N
You have given up or cut back on activities that were important or interesting to you, or gave you pleasure, in order to drink?	Y or N
More than once, you have been arrested, been held at a police station or had other legal problems because of your drinking?	Y or N
You found that when the effects of alcohol were wearing off, you had withdrawal symptoms, such as trouble sleeping, shakiness, restlessness, nausea, sweating, a racing heart or a seizure? Or sensed things that were not there?	Y or N

Note: These questions were taken from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) website and are based on symptoms used by the American Psychiatric Association to diagnose alcohol use disorders.

If you have answered "yes" to any of the above questions, you may have a problem with alcohol. The more symptoms you have, the more urgent is your need for help.

Take this test to your doctor to talk about your concerns. He or she can look at your answers to tell whether you have an alcohol problem. Several therapies are available to help people stop drinking, including counseling, medications and support groups.



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Recognizing symptoms, being honest about them and making a change is tough for many people. People with a drinking problem must decide for themselves when to quit. For many, that decision to quit comes only after an arrest, divorce or other tragic scenario.

You can make positive steps even if you are not ready to quit drinking. You might want to:

- Keep track of how much and when you drink.
- Make a list of all of the consequences of continuing to drink.
- Look at situations that may be contributing to a drinking problem, such as stress, lifestyle, peer pressure, habits or other factors.
- Talk to someone you trust about making a change.

Why Alcohol Misuse Is Dangerous

Drinking alcohol in excess is a risky behavior that can have lasting effects on your health.

Every 2 minutes someone dies because of alcohol. In fact, excessive drinking is the third-leading lifestyle-related cause of death in the U.S. Drinking alcohol is linked to more than 60 health issues.

When you drink in excess, the effects of alcohol aren't limited to just you. Your drinking can also hurt someone else. Half of all alcohol-related deaths are due to unintentional injuries, such as from car accidents, for example.

Excessive drinking defined

Heavy drinking and binge drinking fall under the category of "excessive drinking."

- **Heavy drinking:**
 - More than one drink per day on average for women.
 - More than two drinks each day on average for men.
- **Binge drinking:**
 - More than four drinks during one time (generally in a two-hour period) for women.
 - More than five drinks during one occasion for men.

One drink is considered:

- 12 oz. of beer or a wine cooler
- 5 oz. of wine
- 1.5 oz. of distilled liquor (for example, vodka, rum or whiskey)

A personal problem: how alcohol misuse hurts you



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When you drink alcohol, it's quickly absorbed from the stomach and small intestine and into the bloodstream. The liver can only break down (metabolize) a small amount of alcohol at a time. The rest of the alcohol lingers in the bloodstream and causes you to "feel drunk." This harms the central nervous system (the brain and spinal cord), which is dangerous because the central nervous system controls all functions of the body. The more alcohol you drink at once, the greater the damage.

The immediate effects of alcohol may include:

- Impaired judgment and inability to measure risks
- Lowered inhibitions
- Slower reaction time and reflexes
- Loss of coordination and balance
- Distorted vision
- Lapses in memory

Drinking too much alcohol over time can cause a slew of lasting health problems, such as:

- Chronic liver disease
- Cancer
- Heart disease and stroke
- Mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety
- Alcohol addiction
- Medical problems in unborn babies if any amount of alcohol is consumed during pregnancy.
- Alcohol poisoning, which can be deadly. This can happen when you drink too much at once

Alcohol misuse can also impact other areas of your life. It's linked with:

- Domestic abuse and other violent behaviors
- Relationship issues
- Risky sexual behaviors
- Financial problems
- Being unproductive at work
- Accidents

A public health problem: how alcohol misuse hurts others

Excessive alcohol use hurts us all. It reaches into every aspect of society and has an economic impact as well. Look at the facts:

- One-fifth to one half of all car accident deaths are due to alcohol.
- Of people admitted to hospitals (not counting those in maternity or intensive care units), 25 percent to 40 percent are being treated for alcohol-related issues.
- Alcohol problems cost the U.S. about 185 billion dollars per year. Health care expenses for alcohol-related illness and injury cost 22.5 billion dollars each year.
- Underage drinking is a huge public health problem:
- Alcohol is a leading cause of death and injury in teens from car accidents, fires, drownings, homicides and suicides.



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- When teens drink, nine out of 10 times they are binge drinking.
- One in four teens admits to binge drinking.
- Three in 10 teens admit to riding in a vehicle with a driver who has been drinking.

Be responsible

If you are 21 years of age or older and choose to drink, do so in moderation. Women should only have one drink per day, and men should limit alcohol to two drinks each day. It is not safe to drink any amount of alcohol during pregnancy.

Never drink alcohol before or while driving, or when participating in any other activities that require skill or concentration.

Risk Factors for Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse

Learn the risk factors for alcoholism.

In the United States, 17.6 million people--about one in every 12 adults--abuse alcohol or are alcohol dependent. Anyone can misuse alcohol. The following factors put you at increased risk of developing alcoholism:

- A family member who suffers from alcoholism
- A history of substance abuse
- A history of depression
- Having a post-traumatic stress disorder
- Peer pressure
- Being under stress
- Easy availability of alcohol

People with family histories of alcoholism should be particularly alert for signs of problems. Children of alcoholics are about four times more likely than others to develop alcohol problems, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. The addiction may skip a generation, too. A child of an alcoholic may never drink, but still pass on a genetic vulnerability to their children and/or an unhealthy lifestyle that could lead to drinking.

Other risk-related statistics:

- The risk for alcoholism is higher among people who begin to drink in their early teens, as opposed to after age 21.
- More men than women are alcohol dependent or experience alcohol-related problems.
- Rates of alcohol problems are highest among young adults ages 18 to 29 and lowest among adults 65 years and older.
- Rates of alcoholism and alcohol-related problems vary among major ethnic groups. Alcoholism is twice as high among Native Americans than other Americans. Hispanics have a higher rate of alcoholism than African Americans or Caucasians.



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More than 100,000 Americans die of alcohol-related causes every year. Alcoholism and alcohol abuse can be factors in violent crimes, teen pregnancies and date rape. If you suspect that you or someone you know has a problem, seek help now.

Health Tip: Diabetics and Drinking

Ask your doctor if you should drink at all

If you have diabetes and get insulin shots or take other diabetes medication, you may end up with low blood sugar if you drink alcohol, the American Diabetes Association says.

If your doctor says it's OK for you to have a drink now and then, the association offers these guidelines to help you use alcohol safely:

- Just as with non-diabetics, only moderate drinking -- one drink a day for women, two for men -- is recommended.
- Since alcohol can contribute to low blood sugar, always drink with a meal or on a full stomach.
- If you are watching your weight, know that alcohol is high in calories, and can quickly cause unwanted weight gain.
- Look for drinks to mix with alcohol that are low in sugar or sugar-free, such as a diet soda, tonic, sparkling water or club soda.
- Don't drink alcohol if you have nerve damage or high blood pressure.

Basic Information About Asthma

Here is a primer on asthma, including how it's diagnosed and what you can do about it.

You may experience it as wheezing. Maybe you wake up at night coughing. Either can be a sign of asthma. You are not alone.

More than 20 million Americans have asthma.

What is asthma?

Asthma is a chronic inflammatory lung disease that affects children and adults. Certain triggers constrict the airways leading to the lungs (called bronchi). The lining of these airways swells and excess mucus builds up. Together, these actions can severely restrict air flow. This can cause difficult breathing, wheezing and coughing.

Symptoms of asthma occur when a "trigger" sets off this chain reaction. An asthma trigger is often an irritant or allergen



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(something you're allergic to).

You can help take control of your asthma by taking four steps:

- Work with your doctor to learn asthma self-care.
- Learn about your medicines and how to take them.
- Identify your asthma triggers, and avoid them.
- Know how to self-monitor your asthma and what to do if you have signs of an asthma attack.

What are the symptoms of asthma?

Symptoms of asthma may include:

- Wheezing
- Shortness of breath, perhaps only with exercise
- Feeling a tightness in the chest
- Coughing, which may occur only at night

Who is at risk?

Asthma tends to run in families. People who have allergies are also at increased risk of developing asthma. Eighty percent of children and half of adults with asthma also have allergies.

What are the most common triggers for asthma symptoms?

A trigger is something that causes asthma symptoms. The most common are:

- Allergens, such as dust mites, cockroaches, mold and pollen
- Weather
- Exercise
- Airborne irritants such as chemical fumes, tobacco and wood stove smoke
- Respiratory infections
- Strong emotions, such as laughing, crying and stress

Diagnosing asthma

It's easy to confuse asthma symptoms with a bad cold and cough. But colds go away. Asthma does not. What's more, having untreated asthma means you are at risk of a serious - even life-threatening - asthma attack. So if you think you have asthma, see your doctor. And if you've already seen the doctor and still have trouble managing symptoms, it may be time to adjust treatment or refine the diagnosis.

Your doctor will ask you questions about symptoms and listen to your lungs. The doctor will ask you:



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- About coughing - if your cough is worse at night or with exercise and if you bring up mucous.
- About shortness of breath - if you tend to get out of breath when you exercise, or if you have breathing problems at certain times of the year.
- About other symptoms, such as chest tightness and wheezing.

You will have a breathing test called spirometry. This test measures the amount of air you can move out of your lungs. It also can tell if treatment is effective by comparing the results before and after you take your medication.

What to Ask Your Doctor If You Have Asthma

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the number of asthma sufferers has grown from 6.7 million in 1980 to 20.5 million in 2001, making asthma one of the leading public health problems in the United States today. Asthma does not have a cure, but you have highly effective ways to control symptoms. If you've recently been diagnosed with asthma, here are some questions you may want to ask your physician. Choose the five most important questions. Your doctor might not have time to answer all your questions. Ask for any brochures that your doctor may have.

Choose the five most important questions

- What triggers an asthma attack?
- What steps can I take to prevent an asthma attack?
- Will I have asthma for the rest of my life?
- Will my asthma worsen as I get older?
- What are my chances of dying from an asthma attack?
- What is the best therapy available to manage asthma?
- Will I need respiratory therapy?
- Will I need to carry my asthma inhaler all the time?
- Are there any adverse side effects to the asthma medication I'll be taking?
- Will I need to take medication every day or just when I experience asthma symptoms?
- Are there any prescription or nonprescription drugs I should avoid to prevent an adverse reaction with my asthma medication?
- Is there a drug I can take to prevent an asthma attack if I know I'll be coming into contact with one of my asthma triggers?
- Is it possible to manage asthma without medication?
- How long does a typical asthma attack last if it goes untreated?
- Will I have to get rid of my pets?
- Will I need to avoid high elevations?
- Will I need to change my diet?
- Will losing weight reduce my risk of having an asthma attack?
- Are the nonprescription asthma inhalers any good?
- Are there changes I can make in my home or work environments to reduce my risk of having an asthma attack?



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- Are there any breathing or relaxation exercises I can do to help me cope with asthma?
- Will I need to limit my physical activities or avoid physical exertion now that I have asthma?
- What should I do if I have an asthma attack but don't have my medication with me?
- Should I avoid secondhand smoke?
- Should I avoid certain foods or alcoholic beverages?
- Can you provide resources to educate my family and friends about asthma?
- Can you refer me to an asthma support group in my area?
- Are researchers likely to find a cure for asthma in the not-too-distant future?

Eating a Heart Healthy Diet

Learn how to eat a heart healthy diet.

Diseases of the heart are the leading causes of death in the United States of America. Heart disease affects both men and women and people of all races. Diet and exercise can directly affect your heart health by decreasing your chances of developing conditions such as high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol levels, obesity, and the heart healthy diet helps control diabetes, too.

If you eat a heart healthy diet that is low in sodium, saturated fat (which directly affects the LDL cholesterol levels), trans fats and cholesterol, and at the same time high in soluble fiber, you can improve your heart health. It is also important to make achieving a healthy weight one of your goals, in order to decrease your chances of developing coronary heart disease (CHD).

The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends:

- Eat lots of vegetables and fruits. They are high in vitamins, minerals and fiber and they're low in calories. Eating a variety of fruits and vegetables may help you control your weight and your blood pressure.
- Choose unrefined whole-grain foods that contain fiber. Fiber can help lower your blood cholesterol and help you feel full, which may help you manage your weight.
- Eat fish at least twice a week. Recent research shows that eating oily fish containing omega-3 fatty acids (for example, salmon, trout, and herring) may help lower your risk of death from coronary artery disease.
- Choose lean meats and poultry. Remove extra fat and skin and broil, sauté or cook meat without saturated and trans fat.
- Select fat-free, 1 percent fat, and low-fat dairy products.
- Cut back on foods containing trans fats, look for partially hydrogenated vegetable oils on the ingredient list.



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- Cut back on foods high in dietary cholesterol. Aim to eat less than 300 milligrams of cholesterol each day.
- Cut back on beverages and foods with added sugars.
- Choose and prepare foods with little or no salt. Aim to eat less than 2,300 milligrams of sodium per day. Don't add salt to foods at the table.
- If you drink alcohol, drink in moderation. That is one drink per day if you're a woman and two drinks per day if you're a man.
- Keep an eye on your portion sizes and try to follow the above recommendations when you eat out.

For those trying to lose weight, exercise plays an important role. It is recommended to participate in exercise 30 minutes per day most days of the week for adults. Exercising regularly promotes weight loss and increases the "good" cholesterol, thus clearing the arteries for blood to flow more freely. Speak to your health care professional for the safest exercise for you.

Short Workouts Can Be Good for Your Heart

Don't avoid exercising because you're short on time. Even quick workouts can benefit your health.

How much exercise do you need to help prevent heart disease? Do you need an hour breaking a sweat at the gym? Or will a walk around the block suffice?

Most people know that exercise is important to health. The American Heart Association recommends that all adults do some form of physical activity for at least 30 minutes most days of the week. Thankfully, you can break up this activity into 15-minute sessions if that works better for you, fitness experts say.

It's true that exercise such as brisk walking or aerobics may yield great health benefits. But even moderate-intensity activities like walking for pleasure, doing yard work or dancing may help you lower your risk for heart disease.

How 15 minutes can help

You don't need to be an athlete to enjoy the health benefits of exercise. Short bursts of activity can help your heart, too. And most people should be able to carve out 15 minutes a couple times a day to be active.



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Doctors aren't exactly sure why exercise helps, but it has been shown to raise the level of HDL cholesterol - the so-called good kind - in the blood. High HDL levels have been shown to help protect against heart disease.

Exercise is also thought to make the endothelial cells that line our arteries healthier. These cells are vital in preventing the clogging and hardening of the arteries.

Always check with your doctor before you start any kind of exercise program, though.

Making quick workouts count

Aerobic exercise is what hearts like best. It helps the heart become stronger and work more efficiently.

You can get an aerobic workout from numerous activities, such as:

- Biking
- Brisk walking, jogging or running
- Swimming
- Dancing
- Jumping rope
- Using exercise machines like the treadmill, stationary bike, rowing machine or stair climber

What's most important is simply that you get moving! It can be overwhelming to know where to start if you haven't exercised much before. So talk with your doctor to find a level of activity that is safe for you. In addition to doing what you typically think of as "exercise," you can also get aerobic workout benefits in your daily life. House cleaning or gardening can raise your heart rate. Seasonal recreational sports like ice skating, soccer and beach volleyball can also help get your heart pumping while you're doing something fun at the same time.

