

Addiction; What to do if there is a problem with Alcohol or Drug use

How can I tell if alcohol is a problem for me?

Alcohol is a problem for you if it causes problems in any part of your life. This includes your health, your work and your life at home. You 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 often drink more than you plan to.

Ask yourself these questions

If you answer yes to 1 or more of the questions, you may have a problem with alcohol. Have you ever felt:

- The need to cut down on your drinking?
- Annoyed by criticism of your drinking?
- Guilty about your drinking?
- As if you need an eye-opener in the morning?

Who has an alcohol problem?

Many people only think of a "skid-row bum" when they think of someone with an alcohol problem. This is the end stage of alcohol problems, when a person has lost his or her family, job and health because of alcohol abuse. You don't reach this stage overnight.

You may see less obvious changes along the way, beginning with drinking more than you intended or more than is safe for what you are doing (like driving a car).

Many people find it hard to admit when alcohol is a problem. Often, people around you may see your problem before you do. Think about the things mentioned here. Think about what your friends and family say to you about drinking. Then talk with your family doctor about your concerns.

Signs alcohol is a problem

- Accidents
- Anxiety
- Being unusually suspicious
- Blackouts/memory loss
- Breakdown of relationships
- Depression
- Getting driving tickets
- Insomnia
- Loss of self-esteem
- Not taking care of yourself
- Poor work performance
- Taking sick days for hangovers
- Trembling hands
- Trouble having erections (men)

How does alcohol affect my health?

Alcohol is best known as a cause of cirrhosis, a disease of the liver. However, it has many other effects on your health. It's a major cause of deaths and injuries

due to accidents. It can have severe effects on a baby during pregnancy. It can also cause stomach pain due to a bleeding ulcer or irritated stomach lining.

What causes alcoholism?

The causes of alcoholism are not fully known. A history of alcoholism in your family makes it more likely. Men seem to be more at risk than women. Some drinkers use alcohol to try to relieve anxiety, depression, tension, loneliness, self-doubt or unhappiness. There is a strong genetic basis and physical changes have been found in the brains of alcoholics, they actually metabolize alcohol differently and have different effects on brain activity than that found in non-alcoholics who have consumed a similar amount of alcohol. Most people don't want to have a chunk of their brain cut out and sent to the lab for proof however!

Why should I quit?

Quitting is the only way to stop the problems alcohol is causing in your life. It may not be easy to quit. But your efforts will be rewarded by better health, better relationships and a sense of accomplishment. As you think about quitting, you may want to make a list of your reasons to quit. Have you ever seen the worm in a bottle of Tequila swim? Probably not, the worm is dead for a reason!

How do I stop?

The first step is realizing that you control your own behavior. It's the only real control you have in your life. So use it. Here are the next steps:

- 1. Commit to quitting.** Once you decide to quit, you can make plans to be sure you succeed.
- 2. Get help from your doctor.** He or she can be your biggest ally. Alcoholism is a kind of disease, and it can be treated. Talking with your doctor or a counselor about your problems can be helpful too.
- 3. Get support.** Contact Alcoholics Anonymous (check the phone book, or visit www.aa.org) or the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (800-475-HOPE, or visit www.ncadd.org). They will give you the tools and support you need to quit. Ask your family and friends for support too.

What does it feel like to quit drinking?

As you drink, your body tries to make up for the depressant effects of alcohol. This built-up tolerance to alcohol can lead to severe withdrawal symptoms when people who drink a lot quit.

Serious withdrawal symptoms include seeing things, seizures and delirium tremens (confusion, seeing vivid images, severe shakes, being very suspicious), and can even include death. This is why you may need your doctor's care if you've been drinking heavily and are trying to quit.

Alcohol or Drug Abuse Recovery: Your Doctor Can Help

Why do I need to tell my doctor that I am in recovery?

The decision to stop using alcohol or other drugs is very important to your health. If your doctor knows that you have made this decision, he or she can help you during your recovery. By working with your doctor, you can increase your chance of not abusing alcohol or other drugs again. Your doctor can give you emotional support and treat any medical problems that may occur during your recovery. It is also important for your doctor to know that you have a history of using alcohol or other drugs.

What are the medical consequences of alcohol or drug abuse?

Alcohol and other drugs can cause or worsen a wide range of medical problems. For example, alcohol increases the risk of some stomach and heart diseases. Some people get gastritis (inflammation of the stomach lining) or high blood pressure because of drinking too much alcohol. Also, if you were taking a medicine, such as blood pressure medicine, during the time when you were drinking or using drugs, your doctor may need to lower the dose of this medicine now that you're not drinking or using drugs.

Mood changes, such as irritability, anger, depression and anxiety, insomnia (problems sleeping) and problems with sexual function are common in the first few months of recovery. If you have any of these problems and discuss them honestly with your doctor, he or she can help you.

Is it safe to take medicine for pain or anxiety if I have these problems?

In general, taking medicines for anxiety or pain for a long time can increase your risk of a relapse. For this reason, your doctor may want you to try other ways of relieving any pain, anxiety, depression or insomnia you may have. For example, instead of using medicine to relieve pain, your doctor may suggest that you try physical therapy, relaxation techniques, ice or heat on the painful area, or massage. These methods are often helpful. Non-narcotic pain medicines can also be helpful in relieving pain if the other methods don't work. Using relaxation techniques, like deep breathing and meditation, may also help relieve your feelings of stress and anxiety.

Tranquilizers and some muscle relaxants, such as benzodiazepines, barbiturates and meprobamate (brand names: Equanil, Miltown), should be avoided if at all possible. Narcotic medicines, including pain killers, analgesics and opiates, increase the risk of relapse. This is particularly true if you have previously abused a narcotic such as heroin, codeine, morphine or oxycodone (two brand names: Oxycontin, Percodan). None of these medicines should be used for chronic (ongoing) pain problems, such as chronic back pain or migraine pain. However, narcotics, tranquilizers or muscle relaxants may be prescribed for a few days to manage pain due to an injury, surgery or a dental procedure.

What if I need a strong pain medicine?

When tranquilizers and narcotics are the only option (such as after an injury or surgery), you can reduce your risk of relapse by being open and honest with your doctor. The two of you can work together to find the safest treatment for you.

The smallest possible dose of a tranquilizer or narcotic medicine should be used, and the medicine should be taken for as short a time as possible. If you are active in a 12-step program or another self-help support program, you should let your fellow members know that you are taking these medications.

Is it safe to take antidepressants if depression is a problem during my recovery?

Depression can be a problem for some patients during recovery. Major depression is a serious medical condition and often must be treated with an antidepressant. Many patients in recovery are concerned about taking one of these medicines. However, when appropriately prescribed, antidepressants do not carry a risk of relapse. Based on your recovery status, your doctor will be able to tell if you need to take an antidepressant.

During the first few months of recovery, you may find that participation in a self-help group like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous can help with certain feelings of depression. It is very important to let your doctor know if you are involved in such a group.

Why is it important for me to be honest with my doctor about my history of alcohol or drug abuse?

Honesty and strict attention to the process of recovery are among the keys to long-term success. For this reason, it is very important for you to be honest with your doctor.

In the past, you may not have been open with your doctor about how much, how often and how long you used alcohol or other drugs. You may be uncomfortable about telling your doctor that you have abused prescription medicines. Perhaps you're afraid that sharing this information with your doctor may result in him or her not prescribing medicines when you need them.

No matter what your past relationship with your doctor was--whether or not you were open about your alcohol or drug problem--your future relationship needs to be based on trust. You must be willing to work together to support your long-term recovery. Just as you can learn something from your doctor, your doctor can learn something from you. For example, you may be involved in a 12-step program, and your doctor may not know as much about how the program works as you do. He or she will be eager to learn from you and to help you with your journey to recovery.