

Alcohol/Alcohol Use Disorder (Alcoholism)

- ⇒ In 2019, about 24.6 percent of 14- to 15-year-olds reported having at least 1 drink.
- ⇒ In 2019, 7.0 million young people ages 12 to 20 reported that they drank alcohol beyond “just a few sips” in the past month.
- ⇒ In 2019, 4.2 million young people reported binge drinking at least once in the past month.

Overview

Alcohol use disorder (*which includes a level that's sometimes called alcoholism*) is a pattern of alcohol use that involves problems controlling your drinking, being preoccupied with alcohol, continuing to use alcohol even when it causes problems, having to drink more to get the same effect, or having withdrawal symptoms when you rapidly decrease or stop drinking.

Unhealthy alcohol use includes any alcohol use that puts your health or safety at risk or causes other alcohol-related problems. It also includes binge drinking — a pattern of drinking where a male consumes five or more drinks within two hours or a female downs at least four drinks within two hours. Binge drinking causes significant health and safety risks.

If your pattern of drinking results in repeated significant distress and problems functioning in your daily life, you likely have alcohol use disorder. It can range from mild to severe. However, even a mild disorder can escalate and lead to serious problems, so early treatment is important.

Prevention in Underage Consumption

Early intervention can prevent alcohol-related problems in teens. If you have a teenager, be alert to signs and symptoms that may indicate usage of alcohol:

- Loss of interest in activities and hobbies and in personal appearance

- Red eyes, slurred speech, problems with coordination and memory lapses
- Difficulties or changes in relationships with friends, such as joining a new crowd
- Declining grades and problems in school
- Frequent mood changes and defensive behavior

You can help prevent teenage alcohol use:

- Communicate and encourage abstinence from drinking underage.
- Set a good example with your own alcohol use if you drink.
- Talk openly with your child, spend quality time together and become actively involved in your child's life.
- Let your child know what behavior you expect — and what the consequences will be if he or she doesn't follow the rules.

Signs and Symptoms

Alcohol use disorder can be mild, moderate, or severe, based on the number of symptoms you experience. Signs and symptoms may include:

- Being unable to limit the amount of alcohol you drink
- Wanting to cut down on how much you drink or making unsuccessful attempts to do so
- Spending a lot of time drinking, getting alcohol, or recovering from alcohol use
- Feeling a strong craving or urge to drink alcohol
- Failing to fulfill major obligations at work, school or home due to repeated alcohol use
- Continuing to drink alcohol even though you know it's causing physical, social, or interpersonal problems
- Giving up or reducing social and work activities and hobbies

- Using alcohol in situations where it's not safe, such as when driving or swimming
- Developing a tolerance to alcohol so you need more to feel its effect, or you have a reduced effect from the same amount
- Experiencing withdrawal symptoms — such as nausea, sweating and shaking — when you don't drink, or drinking to avoid these symptoms

Alcohol use disorder can include periods of alcohol intoxication and symptoms of withdrawal.

- **Alcohol intoxication** results as the amount of alcohol in your bloodstream increases. The higher the blood alcohol concentration is, the more impaired you become. Alcohol intoxication causes behavior problems and mental changes. These may include inappropriate behavior, unstable moods, impaired judgment, slurred speech, impaired attention or memory, and poor coordination. You can also have periods called "blackouts," where you don't remember events. Very high blood alcohol levels can lead to coma or even death.
- **Alcohol withdrawal** can occur when alcohol use has been heavy and prolonged and is then stopped or greatly reduced. It can occur within several hours to four or five days later. Signs and symptoms include sweating, rapid heartbeat, hand tremors, problems sleeping, nausea and vomiting, hallucinations, restlessness and agitation, anxiety, and occasionally seizures. Symptoms can be severe enough to impair your ability to function at work or in social situations.

What is considered 1 drink?

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism defines one standard drink as any one of these:

- 12 ounces (355 milliliters) of regular beer (about 5 percent alcohol)
- 8 to 9 ounces (237 to 266 milliliters) of malt liquor (about 7 percent alcohol)
- 5 ounces (148 milliliters) of unfortified wine (about 12 percent alcohol)

- 1.5 ounces (44 milliliters) of 80-proof hard liquor (about 40 percent alcohol)

Risk Factors

Alcohol use may begin in the teens (which should never be the case), but alcohol use disorder occurs more frequently in the 20s and 30s, though it can start at any age.

- **Steady drinking over time.** Drinking too much on a regular basis for an extended period or binge drinking on a regular basis can lead to alcohol-related problems or alcohol use disorder.
- **Starting at an early age.** People who begin drinking — especially binge drinking — at an early age are at a higher risk of alcohol use disorder.
- **Family history.** The risk of alcohol use disorder is higher for people who have a parent or other close relative who has problems with alcohol. This may be influenced by genetic factors.
- **Depression and other mental health problems.** It's common for people with a mental health disorder such as anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, or bipolar disorder to have problems with alcohol or other substances.
- **History of trauma.** People with a history of emotional or other trauma are at increased risk of alcohol use disorder.
- **Having bariatric surgery.** Some research studies indicate that having bariatric surgery may increase the risk of developing alcohol use disorder or of relapsing after recovering from alcohol use disorder.
- **Social and cultural factors.** Having friends or a close loved one who drinks regularly could increase your risk of alcohol use disorder. The glamorous way that drinking is sometimes portrayed in the media also may send the message that it's OK to drink too much. For young people, the influence of parents, peers and other role models can impact risk.

Treatments

Treatment for alcohol use disorder can vary, depending on your needs. Treatment may involve a brief intervention, individual or group counseling, an outpatient

program, or a residential inpatient stay. Working to stop the use of alcohol to improve quality of life is the main treatment goal.

Treatment for alcohol use disorder may include:

- **Detox and withdrawal.** Treatment may begin with a program of detoxification or detox — withdrawal that's medically managed — which generally takes two to seven days. You may need to take sedating medications to prevent withdrawal symptoms. Detox is usually done at an inpatient treatment center or a hospital.
- **Learning skills and establishing a treatment plan.** This usually involves alcohol treatment specialists. It may include goal setting, behavior change techniques, use of self-help manuals, counseling, and follow-up care at a treatment center.
- **Professional Counseling.** Counseling and therapy for groups and individuals help you better understand your problem with alcohol and support recovery from the psychological aspects of alcohol use. You may benefit from couples or family therapy — family support can be an important part of the recovery process.
- **Oral medications.** A drug called disulfiram (Antabuse) may help prevent you from drinking, although it won't cure alcohol use disorder or remove the compulsion to drink. If you drink alcohol, the drug produces a physical reaction that may include flushing, nausea, vomiting and headaches. Naltrexone, a drug that blocks the good feelings alcohol causes, may prevent heavy drinking and reduce the urge to drink. Acamprosate may help you combat alcohol cravings once you stop drinking. Unlike disulfiram, naltrexone and acamprosate don't make you feel sick after taking a drink.
- **Injected medication.** Vivitrol, a version of the drug naltrexone, is injected once a month by a health care professional. Although similar medication can be taken in pill form, the injectable version of the drug may be easier for people recovering from alcohol use disorder to use consistently.
- **Continuing support.** Aftercare programs and support groups help people recovering from alcohol use disorder to stop drinking, manage relapses

and cope with necessary lifestyle changes. This may include medical or psychological care or attending a support group.

- **Treatment for psychological problems.** Alcohol use disorder commonly occurs along with other mental health disorders. If you have depression, anxiety or another mental health condition, you may need talk therapy (psychotherapy), medications or other treatment.
- **Medical treatment for health conditions.** Many alcohol-related health problems improve significantly once you stop drinking. But some health conditions may warrant continued treatment and follow-up.

Residential treatment programs

For serious alcohol use disorder, you may need a stay at a residential treatment facility. Most residential treatment programs include individual and group therapy, support groups, educational lectures, family involvement and activity therapy.

Residential treatment programs typically include licensed alcohol and drug counselors, social workers, nurses, doctors and others with expertise and experience in treating alcohol use disorder.

How Do I Get Help?

As part of your recovery, you'll need to focus on changing your habits and making different lifestyle choices. These strategies may help.

- **Consider your social situation.** Make it clear to your friends and family that you're not drinking alcohol. Develop a support system of friends and family who can support you. You may need to distance yourself from certain friends and social situations.
- **Develop healthy habits.** For example, good sleep, regular physical activity, managing stress more effectively and eating well all can make it easier for you to refrain from drinking and/or recover from alcohol use disorder.
- **Do things that don't involve alcohol.** You may find that many of your activities involve drinking. Replace them with hobbies or activities that are not centered around alcohol.

Many people with alcohol problems and their family members find that participating in support groups is an essential part of coping with the disease, preventing or dealing with relapses, and staying sober. Your doctor or counselor can suggest a support group. These groups are also often listed on the web and sometimes in the phone book.

Here are a few examples:

- **Celebrate Recovery.** Celebrate Recovery is a Christ-centered, 12 step recovery program for anyone struggling with hurt, pain or addiction of any kind. It is a safe place to find community and freedom from the issues that are controlling our life.
- **Alcoholics Anonymous.** Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is a self-help group for people recovering from alcoholism. AA offers a sober peer group and is built around 12 steps as an effective model for achieving total abstinence.
- **Al-Anon and Alateen.** Al-Anon is designed for people who are affected by someone else's alcoholism. **Alateen groups are available for teenage children of those with alcoholism.** In sharing their stories, family members gain a greater understanding of how the disease affects the entire family.

Need help getting connected to a professional? Email counseling@breakdownstl.org for assistance.

Sources:

* Mayo Clinic - <https://www.mayoclinic.org>

*National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism - <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov>