

Top 10 FAQ's on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

1: What is alcoholism?

Alcoholism, also known as alcohol dependence, is a disease that includes the following four symptoms:

Craving--A strong need, or urge, to drink.

Loss of control--Not being able to stop drinking once drinking has begun.

Physical dependence--Withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, shakiness, and anxiety after stopping drinking.

Tolerance--The need to drink greater amounts of alcohol to get "high."

2: Is alcoholism a disease?

Yes, alcoholism is a disease. The craving that an alcoholic feels for alcohol can be as strong as the need for food or water. An alcoholic will continue to drink despite serious family, health, or legal problems. Like many other diseases, alcoholism is chronic, meaning that it lasts a person's lifetime; it usually follows a predictable course; and it has symptoms. The risk for developing alcoholism is influenced both by a person's genes and by his or her lifestyle.

3: Can alcoholism be cured?

No, alcoholism cannot be cured at this time. Even if an alcoholic hasn't been drinking for a long time, he or she can still suffer a relapse. To guard against a relapse, an alcoholic must continue to avoid all alcoholic beverages.

4: Can alcoholism be treated?

Yes, alcoholism can be treated. Alcoholism treatment programs use both counseling and medications to help a person stop drinking. Most alcoholics need help to recover from their disease. With support and treatment, many people are able to stop drinking and rebuild their lives. Alcoholism treatment works for many people. But just like any chronic disease, there are varying levels of success when it comes to treatment. Some people stop drinking and remain sober. Others have long periods of sobriety with bouts of relapse. And still others cannot stop drinking for any length of time. With treatment, one thing is clear, however: the longer a person abstains from alcohol, the more likely he or she will be able to stay sober.

5: Do you have to be an alcoholic to experience problems?

No. Alcoholism is only one type of an alcohol problem. Alcohol abuse can be just as harmful. A person can abuse alcohol without actually being an alcoholic--that is, he or she may drink too much and too often but still not be dependent on alcohol. Some of the problems linked to alcohol abuse include not being able to meet work, school, or family responsibilities; drunk-driving arrests and car crashes; and drinking-related medical conditions. Under some circumstances, even social or moderate drinking is dangerous--for example, when driving, during pregnancy, or when taking certain medications.

6: How can you tell if someone has a problem?

Answering the following four questions can help you find out if you or a loved one has a drinking problem:

Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?

Have people annoyed you by criticizing your drinking?

Have you ever felt bad or guilty about your drinking?

Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover?

One "yes" answer suggests a possible alcohol problem. More than one "yes" answer means it is highly likely that a problem exists. If you think that you or someone you know might have an alcohol problem, it is important to see a doctor or other health care provider right away. They can help you determine if a drinking problem exists and plan the best course of action.

7: If an alcoholic is unwilling to get help, what can you do about it?

This can be a challenge. An alcoholic can't be forced to get help except under certain circumstances, such as a violent incident that results in court-ordered treatment or medical emergency. But you don't have to wait for someone to "hit rock bottom" to act. Many alcoholism treatment specialists suggest the following steps to help an alcoholic get treatment:

Stop all "cover ups." Family members often make excuses to others or try to protect the alcoholic from the results of his or her drinking. It is important to stop covering for the alcoholic so that he or she experiences the full consequences of drinking.

Time your intervention. The best time to talk to the drinker is shortly after an alcohol-related problem has occurred--like a serious family argument or an accident. Choose a time when he or she is sober, both of you are fairly calm, and you have a chance to talk in private.

Be specific. Tell the family member that you are worried about his or her drinking. Use examples of the ways in which the drinking has caused problems, including the most recent incident.

State the results. Explain to the drinker what you will do if he or she doesn't go for help--not to punish the drinker, but to protect yourself from his or her problems. What you say may range from refusing to go with the person to any social activity where alcohol will be served, to moving out of the house. Do not make any threats you are not prepared to carry out.

Get help. Gather information in advance about treatment options in your community. If the person is willing to get help, call immediately for an appointment with a treatment counselor. Offer to go with the family member on the first visit to a treatment program and/or an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

Call on a friend. If the family member still refuses to get help, ask a friend to talk with him or her using the steps just described. A friend who is a recovering alcoholic may be particularly persuasive, but any person who is caring and nonjudgmental may help. The intervention of more than one person, more than one time, is often necessary to coax an alcoholic to seek help.

Find strength in numbers. With the help of a health care professional, some families join with other relatives and friends to confront an alcoholic as a group. This approach should only be tried under the guidance of a health care professional who is experienced in this kind of group intervention.

Get support. It is important to remember that you are not alone. Support groups offered in most communities include Al-Anon, which holds regular meetings for spouses and other significant adults in an alcoholic's life, and Alateen, which is geared to children of alcoholics. These groups help family members understand that they are not responsible for an alcoholic's drinking and that they need to take steps to take care of themselves, regardless of whether the alcoholic family member chooses to get help.

Contact Support Services. You can call the National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral Routing Service (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment) at 1-800-662-HELP for information about treatment programs in your local community and to speak to someone about an alcohol problem.

Al-Anon Family Groups

Support groups for families and friends of alcoholics
(888) 425-2666

<http://www.al-anon.org>

Alcoholics Anonymous

Support groups for recovering alcoholics and those who want to abstain from alcohol
(813) 933-9722
(813) 933-9123

<http://www.aa.org>

National Association for Children of Alcoholics

Information and educational materials for children of alcoholics and professionals
(888) 554-COAS

<http://www.health.org/nacoa/>

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence

Information and referrals, public education and advocacy
(800) NCA-CALL
(212) 206-6770

<http://www.ncadd.org>

Narcotics Anonymous

Support groups for recovering drug abusers and those who want to abstain from drugs
(727) 547-0444

<http://www.na.org/>

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information

Educational materials and information

(800) 729-6686

(301) 468-2600

<http://www.health.org>

8: What is a safe level of drinking?

For most adults, moderate alcohol use--up to two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women and older people--causes few if any problems. (One drink equals one 12-ounce bottle of beer or wine cooler, one 5-ounce glass of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits.)

Certain people should not drink at all, however:

Women who are pregnant or trying to become pregnant

People who plan to drive or engage in other activities that require alertness and skill (such as using high-speed machinery)

People taking certain over-the-counter or prescription medications

People with medical conditions that can be made worse by drinking

Recovering alcoholics

People younger than age 21.

9: Does alcohol affect women differently?

Yes, alcohol affects women differently than men. Women become more impaired than men do after drinking the same amount of alcohol, even when differences in body weight are taken into account. This is because women's bodies have less water than men's bodies. Because alcohol mixes with body water, a given amount of alcohol becomes more concentrated in a woman's body than in a man's. That's why the recommended drinking limit for women is lower than for men. In addition, chronic alcohol abuse takes a heavier physical toll on women than on men. Alcohol dependence and related medical problems, such as brain, heart, and liver damage, progress more rapidly in women than in men.

10: How can a person get help for an alcohol problem?

There are many national and local resources that can help. The National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral Routing Service provides a toll-free telephone number, 1-800-662-HELP, offering various resource information.

Contact the Faculty Assistance Program at (813) 871-1293 or toll-free nationwide at (800) 343-4670.