



Alcohol Use Disorder

What is alcohol use disorder?

Alcohol use disorder means having unhealthy or dangerous drinking habits, such as drinking every day or drinking too much at a time. It can range from mild to severe. The more signs you have, the more severe the disorder may be. Moderate to severe alcohol use disorder is sometimes called addiction.

When you have alcohol use disorder, you continue to drink even though you know your drinking is causing problems. You have a strong need, or craving, to drink. You feel like you must drink just to get by. It can harm your relationships, cause you to miss work, and lead to legal problems such as driving while drunk (intoxicated).

Alcohol use disorder is a long-term (chronic) disease. It's not a weakness or a lack of willpower. Like many other diseases, it has a course that can be predicted, has known symptoms, and is influenced by your genes and your life situation.

How much drinking is too much?

Alcohol is part of many people's lives and may have a place in cultural and family traditions. It can sometimes be hard to know when you begin to drink too much.

You are at risk of drinking too much and should talk to your doctor if you are:

- A woman who has more than 3 drinks at one time or more than 7 drinks a week. A standard drink is 1 can of beer, 1 glass of wine, or 1 mixed drink.
- A man who has more than 4 drinks at one time or more than 14 drinks a week.

What are some signs of alcohol use disorder?

Certain behaviors may mean that you're having trouble with alcohol. These include:

- Not being able to quit drinking or control how much you drink, or constantly wishing you could cut down.
- Spending a lot of time drinking and recovering from drinking.
- Not being able to do your main jobs at work, at school, or at home.
- Not doing important activities because of your alcohol use.
- Drinking alcohol in situations where doing so is dangerous.

How is alcohol use disorder diagnosed?

Alcohol use disorder may be diagnosed at a routine doctor visit or when you see your doctor for another problem. If a partner or friend is worried about your alcohol use, he or she may urge you to see your doctor.

Your doctor will ask questions about your symptoms and past health, and he or she will do a physical exam and sometimes a mental health assessment. The mental health assessment checks to see whether you may have a mental health problem, such as depression.

Your doctor also may ask questions or do tests to look for health problems linked to alcohol, such as cirrhosis.

How is alcohol use disorder treated?

Treatment depends on how bad the alcohol use disorder is. Some people are able to cut back to a moderate level of drinking with help from a counselor. People who are physically dependent on alcohol may need medical treatment and may need to stay in a hospital or treatment center.

Your doctor may decide you need detoxification, or detox, before you start treatment. You need detox when you are physically dependent on alcohol. When you go through detox, you may need medicine to help with withdrawal symptoms.

After detox, you focus on staying alcohol-free, or sober. Most people receive some type of therapy, such as group counseling. You also may need medicine to help you stay sober.

When you are sober, you've taken the first step toward recovery. To gain full recovery, you need to take steps to improve other areas of your life, such as learning to deal with work and family. This makes it easier to stay sober.

You will likely need support to stay sober and in recovery. This can include counseling and support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous. Recovery is a long-term process, not something you can achieve in a few weeks.

Treatment doesn't focus on alcohol use alone. It addresses other parts of your life, like your relationships, work, medical problems, and living situation. Treatment and recovery support you in making positive changes so you can live without alcohol.

What can you do if you or another person has a problem with alcohol?

If you are worried about your alcohol use, get help. Even if you are successful in other areas of your life, visit a doctor or go to a self-help group. The earlier you get help, the easier it will be to cut back or quit.

Helping someone who has alcohol use disorder is hard. If you're covering for the person, you need to stop. For example, don't make excuses for the person when he or she misses work.

You may be able to help by talking to the person about what his or her drinking does to you and others. Talk to the person in private, when the person is not using drugs or alcohol and when you are both calm. If the person agrees to get help, call for an appointment right away. Don't wait.

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