Alcohol Problems

What You Should Know About Alcohol Use

Most adults who drink alcohol drink in moderation (not a lot) are at low risk for developing problems related to their drinking. However, all drinkers, including low-risk drinkers, should know about the health risks connected with drinking alcohol.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOW-RISK DRINKING

Drink in moderation. Moderate drinking is defined as follows:

- Men - no more than two drinks per day.
- Women - no more than one drink per day.
- Over age 65 - no more than one drink per day.

A standard drink is 12 grams of pure alcohol, which is equal to one 12-ounce bottle of beer or wine cooler, one 5-ounce glass of wine, or 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits (whiskey, brandy, vodka, rum, etc.).

ABSTAIN FROM (DO NOT DRINK) ALCOHOL:

- When pregnant or considering pregnancy.
- When taking a medication that interacts with alcohol.
- If you are alcohol dependent.
- A medical condition that prohibits drinking alcohol (for example, ulcer, liver disease, heart disease, etc.).

DISCUSS WITH YOUR CAREGIVER:

- If you are at risk for coronary heart disease, discuss the potential benefits and risks of alcohol use: Light to moderate drinking is associated with lower rates of coronary heart disease in certain populations (for example, men over age 45 and postmenopausal women). Infrequent or non-drinkers are advised not to begin light to moderate drinking to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease so as to avoid creating an alcohol-related problem. Similar protective effects can likely be gained through proper diet and exercise.
- Women and the elderly have smaller amounts of body water than men. As a result women and the elderly achieve a higher blood alcohol concentration after drinking the same amount of alcohol.
- Exposing a fetus to alcohol can cause a broad range of birth defects referred to as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) or Alcohol-Related Birth Defects (ARBD). Although FAS/ARBD is connected with excessive alcohol consumption during pregnancy, studies also have reported neurobehavioral problems in infants born to mothers reporting drinking an average of one drink per day during pregnancy.
- Heavier drinking (i.e., the consumption of more than four drinks per occasion by men and more than three drinks per occasion by women) impairs learning (*cognitive*) and psychomotor functions and increases the risk of alcohol-related problems, including accidents and injuries.

CAGE QUESTIONS:

- Have you ever felt that 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 get rid of a hangover (**Eye opener**)?

If you answered positively to any of these questions: You may be at risk for alcohol-related problems if alcohol consumption is:

- Men: Greater than 14 drinks per week or more than 4 drinks per occasion.
- Women: Greater than 7 drinks per week or more than 3 drinks per occasion.

Do you or your family have a medical history of alcohol-related problems, such as:

- Blackouts.
- Depression.
- Liver dysfunction.
- Hypertension.
- Sexual dysfunction.
- Trauma.
- Sleep disorders.
- Chronic abdominal pain.

- Has your drinking ever caused you problems, such as problems with your family, problems with your work (or school) performance, or accidents/injuries?
- Do you have a compulsion to drink or a preoccupation with drinking?
- Do you have poor control or are you unable to stop drinking once you have started?
- Do you have to drink to avoid withdrawal symptoms?
- Do you have problems with withdrawal such as tremors, nausea, sweats, or mood disturbances?
- Does it take more alcohol than in the past to get you high?
- Do you feel a strong urge to drink?
- Do you change your plans so that you can have a drink?
- Do you ever drink in the morning to relieve the shakes or a hangover?

If you have answered a number of the previous questions positively, it may be time for you to talk to your caregivers, family, and friends and see if they think you have a problem. Alcoholism is a chemical dependency that keeps getting worse and will eventually destroy your health and relationships. Many alcoholics end up dead, impoverished, or in prison. This is often the end result of all chemical dependency.

- Do not be discouraged if you are not ready to take action immediately.
- Decisions to change behavior often involve up and down desires to change and feeling like you cannot decide.
- Try to think more seriously about your drinking behavior.
- Think of the reasons to quit.

WHERE TO GO FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)
Bethesda, MD 20892-7003
301-443-3860
niaaaweb-r@exchange.nih.gov

American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM)
4601 North Park Avenue
Chevy Chase, MD 20815
301-656-3920
email@asam.org

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD)
244 East 58th Street
New York, NY 10022
212-206-6770

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