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Patient information: Alcohol use — when is drinking a problem? (Beyond the Basics)

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INTRODUCTION

Two-thirds of American adults drink alcohol, mainly in social situations with friends or family members. For most of them, drinking alcohol is controlled and safe. However, for the 18 million Americans with alcoholism or related problems, drinking is highly dangerous.

Most people have a hard time distinguishing when "normal drinking" becomes problem drinking. How do you know how much is too much, particularly when a small to moderate amount of alcohol might be good for you? (see "[Patient information: Risks and benefits of alcohol \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)").

In general, drinking is considered a problem when it starts to adversely affect a person's personal or professional life, or when the person loses control over his or her drinking (see '[Definitions of drinking problems](#)' below).

This topic will explain how healthcare providers determine if a person has a drinking problem. It also offers some screening tools you can use on yourself or a relative or friend. To learn how alcohol problems are treated, (see "[Psychosocial treatment of alcohol abuse and dependence](#)" and "[Pharmacotherapy for alcohol abuse and dependence](#)" and "[Ambulatory alcohol detoxification](#)" and "[Clinical management of substance dependence across the continuum of care](#)").

WHO IS AT RISK FOR DRINKING PROBLEMS?

Experts have yet to identify why some people develop problems with alcohol, but they do know that certain factors can increase a person's risk. For instance:

- Alcohol abuse and dependence run in families, and certain genes make people more vulnerable to drinking problems. In fact, people who have a first degree relative (a sibling, parent, or child) who abuses alcohol have three to four times the average risk of developing a drinking problem.
- While problem drinking can affect men and women of all ages and backgrounds, it is more common among men than women and is most common among those aged 18 to 25 [1].

However, women can have alcohol-related problems at lower drinking levels than men. If a man and a woman of the same weight drink the same amount of alcohol, the woman's blood alcohol concentration will be higher, putting her at greater risk for harm [1].

- Alcohol abuse is common in people older than 65 and can be especially dangerous for them; alcohol can interact with medications and is responsible for many fall-related injuries.
- In young people, alcohol and drug use are associated with motor vehicle crashes, suicide and homicide [2]. In addition, people who begin drinking at an early age are four times more likely to develop alcoholism than those who begin drinking at or after age 21.
- Having another psychological problem, such as severe anxiety, depression, or personality disorder, increases the risk of abusing alcohol. By some estimates, 37 percent of those with a drinking problem also have a psychiatric condition [1]. That's important because treating other psychiatric problems is often an integral part of overcoming alcohol addiction.

DEFINITIONS OF DRINKING PROBLEMS

Experts use many terms to describe different types of drinking problems. We will describe the terms alcohol intoxication, alcohol dependence (also known as alcoholism), alcohol abuse, problem drinking, and binge drinking.

Alcohol intoxication — Alcohol intoxication occurs when drinking excess alcohol leads to inappropriate behavior and impaired judgment. Being intoxicated can cause slurred speech, loss of coordination, unsteady walking or running, difficulty paying attention or remembering, confusion, or coma.

Alcohol dependence — Alcohol dependence, also known as alcohol addiction or alcoholism, is the most severe type of drinking problem. People with alcohol dependence lose control over their drinking, become preoccupied with alcohol, and are often in denial about their problem.

People with alcohol **dependence** have a destructive pattern of alcohol use that is associated with three or more of the following [3]:

- Tolerance, meaning that you need larger and larger quantities of alcohol to achieve the same effects you once did with smaller amounts
- Having symptoms of withdrawal, meaning that you experience uncomfortable symptoms when you cut back or stop drinking
- Loss of control over the quantity of alcohol you use (drinking more than you intended)
- Having an ongoing desire to cut down or reduce alcohol use
- Spending an increasing amount of time thinking about, getting, using, or recovering from alcohol
- Neglecting social, occupational, or recreational tasks
- Continuing to drink despite physical and psychological problems

Alcohol addiction can also cause physical symptoms besides tolerance and withdrawal. For instance, alcoholics sometimes have sleep disturbances, trembling, and blackouts or memory lapses following drinking episodes.

Over the long term, alcoholics can develop severe illnesses such as liver disease (alcoholic hepatitis and cirrhosis), inflammation of the pancreas (pancreatitis), a form of heart disease called alcoholic cardiomyopathy, and neurologic disease (see '[Consequences of drinking problems](#)' below).

