

Alcohol Use Disorder

What is Alcohol Use Disorder?

An alcohol use disorder is a disease that causes problems with thinking, behavior, and health. And, the person continues drinking in unsafe ways despite experiencing these problems. In 2014, over 16 million adults and 679,000 adolescents in the United States were living with an alcohol use disorder.

What are the symptoms?

You may be diagnosed with alcohol use disorder if you are suffering from 2 or more of these types of symptoms:

- **Tolerance.** The body adapts to the amount of alcohol you typically consume and then requires increased amounts to get the same effect. Being able to “hold your liquor” might be a warning sign that you have developed a tolerance to alcohol.
- **Lack of control.** This involves using alcohol in larger amounts or over longer periods of time. Cravings or desires ruin attempts to cut down or control use even when you know that drinking is causing or making ongoing problems worse.
- **Change in priorities.** This involves spending a great deal of time in obtaining or using the substance and giving up important social, occupational, or recreational activities because of use.
- **Withdrawal.** When you reduce the amount of alcohol you drink or stop drinking for a while, you can have withdrawal symptoms. These symptoms can range from mild to severe, depending on how much you drink, how long you’ve been drinking, and whether or not you have had any damage to your body’s organs.

Alcohol withdrawal can cause:

- Shortness of breath
- Heart palpitations
- Increased hand trembling
- Nausea or vomiting
- Hallucinations or illusions
- Sweating
- Dry mouth
- Dizziness
- Insomnia
- Restlessness, anxiety
- Seizures and loss of consciousness

What causes it?

We don’t really know what causes a specific person to suffer from alcohol use disorder. However, we do know that there may be multiple causes related to unsafe alcohol use, including:

- Family history of addiction
- Social and environmental factors (such as peer pressure or availability of alcohol)
- Other behavioral health conditions (such as depression or anxiety)

What are the risk factors?

The key risk factor for alcohol use disorder is drinking beyond safe limits as identified by the World Health Organization (see below).



What are the complications?

Nearly 88,000 people die from alcohol-related causes each year in the US, making alcohol use the 4th leading preventable cause of death. Drinking at an increased risk level raises your chance of:

- **Accidents, injuries, and aggression.** Drinking too much increases your risk for every type of injury and violence. Alcohol is a factor in about 60% of fatal burn injuries, drownings, and murders; 50% of severe trauma injuries and sexual assaults; and 40% of fatal crashes and falls.
- **Physical health problems.** Heavy drinkers have a greater chance of liver and heart disease, stroke, digestive problems, and some types of cancer. They're also more likely to have problems with sexual function and premature aging.
- **Emotional and cognitive problems.** People who drink too much are more prone to anxiety and depression. They may have trouble sleeping, remembering things, and solving problems.
- **Problems with relationships, work, and studies.** Heavy drinking can interfere with your interactions and performance in every area of your life.
- **Birth defects.** Drinking during pregnancy can cause brain damage and deformities in the baby. Since scientists don't know whether any amount of alcohol is safe for a developing baby, women who are pregnant or trying to become pregnant should not drink.
- **Alcoholism and alcohol use disorders.** Drinking at an increased risk level raises your chance of developing an alcohol use disorder.

How is it treated?

Your medical provider may refer you to an addiction specialist for consultation if there is a perceived risk. If your risk is moderate to high, you may need to have treatment (at an outpatient or in an acute hospital setting) to help you manage withdrawal symptoms and reduce your risks associated with this disorder. Your medical provider may also prescribe medicines to help you to manage your symptoms.

Additional treatment resources:

- Rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov
- samhsa.gov/treatment
- dsamh.utah.gov/substance-use-disorders

When should I call my doctor?

Talk to your medical provider about your drinking as well as any decision you make to cut down or quit your alcohol use. Your doctor can help you best if you discuss how much and how often you drink and whether or not you are having withdrawal symptoms.

In addition, a medical provider is a great source for ideas and encouragement as well as local resources for those who decide to cut down or stop drinking.

Questions for my doctor
