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## Alcohol Dependence

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### What is Alcoholism?

Alcoholism is a word which has been used to describe a person who is dependent on alcohol. The dependence may be social or physical. Nobody is too young or too old to have trouble with alcohol. It can affect anybody, rich or poor, man or woman.

Alcohol dependence takes many routes. Some people drink in an out-of-control way from their first drink. Others slowly progress over decades to uncontrolled drinking. Some people are daily drinkers. Others may be able to abstain for long periods then have a period of uncontrolled drinking.

### What causes it?

There can be an inherited predisposition towards alcohol dependence within families. This could be because a child inherits genes for alcohol dependence or because a child learns social behaviours from parents, other adults or peers and their home environment. Although there is an increased risk of developing a dependence on alcohol if another family member is dependent, it is unpredictable who will develop alcohol dependence.

There are many theories about what causes alcohol abuse and dependence. Some suggest that increasing amounts of alcohol, consumed over time, will build physical dependence, leading eventually to alcohol dependence.

### Diagnosis

*Ask these questions:*

- Do you get aggressive when you drink?
- Is money becoming a problem because too much is being spent on drinking?
- Is anyone embarrassed by my behaviour when I drink?
- Are arguments about drinking starting to happen?
- Do I get angry if someone close suggests I'm drinking too much?
- Does having a drink seem to be more important than other things?

If you answered yes to two or more of these questions, then you may have a drinking problem.

### Alcohol Problems

**Problem Drinking:** Drinking that leads to problems, e.g. family rows, work rows, health problems, memory loss, traffic or legal convictions, sexual problems - unintended promiscuity, STD or sexual dysfunction.

**Binge Drinking:** Sessions of drinking large quantities of alcohol with long breaks of not drinking. This can lead to minor difficulties such as making a fool of yourself, vomiting, having a hangover, or more serious problems such as having a driving accident and sexual indiscretion.

**Hazardous Drinking:** Drinking over the limit, too often. Drinking too much for your body's health, but not being able to see or feel the problems that are likely to be developing - regular heavy drinking without much strife.

**Alcohol Dependence:** Drinking over the limit, too often and finding it hard to control. In spite of wanting to change your drinking behaviour because of the many problems that occur, you find it difficult. A variant is periodic alcoholism, where binge drinking occurs in between periods of normal drinking or abstinence.

### How to Avoid Hazardous Drinking

*Avoid hazardous drinking by:*

- Drinking water or try low alcohol alternatives
- Alternating with an alcohol free one – a spacer
- Eating before or while drinking
- Avoid drinking in rounds
- Knowing when you have had enough
- Have some alcohol free days each week
- Arrange safe transport home

### Risks Associated with Hazardous Drinking

The effects of drinking at hazardous levels can go unrecognised but the more you drink over the recommended guidelines and the more often you do the greater the risk to your health.

You may recognise some of the more immediate effects on your health including stomach problems, headaches, nausea, sleeping difficulties, depression and sexual impotence.

*In general:*

- Weight gain
- Mood and personality changes
- Alcohol related accidents
- Feeling anxious
- Missing work due to hangovers, headaches
- Family arguments
- Impotence

*Also affects the:*

- Brain
- Liver
- Heart
- Stomach
- Pancreas
- Nervous system

## Helping Someone Change their Drinking

*Neither you nor anyone else can make someone cut down or stop drinking but you can encourage them to make changes.*

There are six stages in the cycle of change that everyone is likely to go through as they change an aspect of their behaviour.

**Pre-contemplation:** Has no intention of changing the behaviour.

**Contemplation:** Is seriously considering changing their behaviour.

**Preparation:** Is intending to change or has taken action to change or managed to make a small change.

**Action:** Has successfully altered the behaviour in a way that lowers the risk for problems.

**Maintenance:** Is remaining free of the behaviour.

**Termination:** Has reached the end of the cycle of change and is no longer experiencing temptation and is confident in all previous risk situations.

## Practical Suggestions for Dealing with Alcohol Dependence

- Try to talk to the person when they are sober and explain how their drinking is affecting you. Remain calm and logical, refuse to be drawn into an argument. Give concrete reasons.

- Point out that you still care for them but you will not support their drinking or make excuses for them any longer.
- Make clear what behaviour you will not accept.
- Make clear what action you will take if it still happens. Don't make idle threats though.
- Don't try to hide the problems from the drinker. Helping them see the effects of their drinking might encourage faster change.

*It is important for them to make the first step.*

## Looking after Yourself

- Make sure you get enough food, sleep and exercise.
- Don't take the blame for someone else's drinking. You cannot cause anyone to drink and you cannot control anyone's drinking.
- Don't pour out the alcohol. It costs too much to replace and it's your budget too.
- Walk away from abuse. It is likely to get worse. It won't just stop tomorrow. Not being battered is certainly a reasonable expectation from a partner.
- Don't feel guilty when you're angry.

## Where to go for Support

### The Alcohol Help Line

A confidential information service for people with questions about their own or someone else's drinking. Available 2pm to 10pm.

For more information phone 0800 787 797

### Al-Anon and Al-Ateen

Confidential support within a group environment for family/friends/whanau who are affected by someone else's drinking behaviour.

For more information phone 03 377 2219

### The Alcohol and Drug Counselling Centre

For more information phone 03 374 5364

### Alcoholics Anonymous

For more information phone 03 379 0860

### Alcohol Drug Association

For more information phone 03 379 8626