

Health Plans



How to identify and treat at-risk drinking

Moderate drinking can be part of a healthy lifestyle. However, when your drinking habits pass a certain threshold or you begin to feel an alcohol dependency, drinking can become dangerous to your health.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), moderate drinking is considered one drink a day for women, or two a day for men. (A standard drink is 12 ounces of beer, 5 – 7 ounces of malt liquor, 5 ounces of wine, or a 1.5 ounce shot of spirits). Unhealthy drinking or alcohol abuse is a pattern of drinking too often or too much at a time.

Alcohol dependence, or alcoholism, means that you are physically or mentally addicted to alcohol. You may crave or have a strong need for alcohol. Alcoholism is a chronic disease and has risk factors just like other chronic diseases, which may include a family history of alcohol abuse, being male, use of alcohol since an early age, depression or history of depression and usage of other substances.

It's possible to have a problem with alcohol even if you're not dependent on it. Below are some of the signs of a drinking problem according to the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#):

- You need to drink more to get the same effect.
- You can't control how much you drink or you struggle to cut back or quit.
- You spend a lot of time drinking and recovering
- You stop doing other activities you used to enjoy.
- You continue to drink even though you know it's harmful to yourself and your relationships.
- You physically hurt someone or yourself while drinking.
- You get into legal trouble while drinking.
- You don't remember what you did or said while you were drinking, also known as "blacking out."
- You make excuses for your drinking or make efforts to hide your drinking.
- Your friends or family are worried about your drinking.

Getting diagnosed

You don't have to get diagnosed with an alcohol problem to reduce your drinking. But you may receive an alcohol abuse or alcoholism diagnosis from your primary care provider or a mental health expert. An alcohol abuse or alcoholism diagnosis is sometimes accompanied by a diagnosis of a mental health issue, known as a dual diagnosis. It's best to treat these problems at the same time.

Getting treatment

You can work with a counselor to reduce your drinking to a moderate level. There are other options involving group therapy, such as [Alcoholics Anonymous](#). If you have a more severe case of alcohol abuse or alcoholism, you may need to visit a hospital or treatment center. Physical addiction needs to be treated with a detox in a treatment center.

After you go through treatment, it will be important to focus on staying sober. This process starts with addressing the other aspects of your life that fueled your dependence on alcohol. A clinical therapist can help you work through these issues.

Some treatment plans involve medicine. These medications may help you stay sober or help you with withdrawal symptoms during detox.

Alcohol and health risks

Besides posing risks to your relationships and career, alcohol abuse and alcoholism can be damaging toward your health.

Alcohol affects nearly every part of your body, and especially takes a toll on your liver, nervous system, heart and brain. It also puts you at risk for high blood pressure, osteoporosis, stroke, cirrhosis and certain types of cancers, among other things. You should always be mindful of your drinking, but be extra careful if you:

- Take medications that interact with alcohol
- Plan to drive or operate machinery
- Are pregnant or trying to become pregnant
- Have a medical condition that increases the effects of alcohol

If you're worried about a friend or family member

We encourage you to help your loved one find treatment. You can play an important part in their recovery. Try to be supportive and involved in treatment, and remember to be patient. Consider getting rid of alcohol in your house. Focus on the positive actions and choices your loved one is making. And be sure to take care of yourself during this process too.

Assess your risk for alcohol abuse or alcoholism

Try the [Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test](#) to assess your relationship with alcohol. A score of 8 or higher indicates that an alcohol disorder is very likely.