

Alcohol dependence

If you drink large quantities of alcohol regularly, you run the risk of becoming alcohol dependent. This means you could develop an addiction to alcohol and find it hard to live day to day without having a drink.

You might find yourself drinking more and more alcohol, and planning your life around ways to find the next drink. Feeling a compulsive need to drink and being unable to stop drinking when you start are also signs of alcohol dependence.

Tolerance to alcohol may increase, so you need to drink larger and larger amounts of alcohol to feel its effects.

Alcohol dependence often isn't down to just one cause, but can be the result of a number of different factors. A predisposition towards alcohol can be inherited, or it might be shaped by family attitudes towards drinking. Some occupations, such as high pressure sales jobs, are associated with social drinking, which may increase the risk of dependence. People living through stressful events, like a death in the family, may find they start to drink more heavily.^{(1) (2)}

FACTS and FIGURES

It is estimated that one in 17 people (6.4%) in Great Britain are alcohol dependent.⁽³⁾ The World Health Organisation defined alcohol dependent individuals as those exhibiting a range of behaviours including the strong desire to drink alcohol to the point that it takes precedence over all other behaviours, persistence to drink despite negative consequences, and physical withdrawal symptoms.⁽⁴⁾

Alcohol dependence was once considered a problem associated with middle age. However, figures from the Department of Health show that alcohol dependence is now more common among younger people. For women, alcohol dependence is highest between ages 16-24, while for men it is highest between ages 25-34.⁽⁵⁾

The symptoms of alcohol dependence can vary from person to person. Common danger signs include:

- A compulsive need to drink and a loss of control over the amount consumed in one sitting.

- Basing all social events around alcohol and worrying where your next drink is coming from when it's closing time.
- Suffering from withdrawal symptoms like sweating, tremors and nausea – and then drinking alcohol to make these symptoms stop.
- Developing a tolerance to alcohol which means you have to drink more to get the desired effect.
- Drinking alcohol, or having a strong desire to, when you wake up.
- Realising that your professional and personal relationships are suffering because of alcohol, but not being able to stop.

While alcohol dependence is a disorder in itself, being dependent on alcohol is also a gateway to further health problems and psychological disorders.

PROGRESSION

Psychological symptoms of alcohol dependence include anxiety, depression and suicidal feelings. Specific physical problems associated with alcohol dependence include insomnia, sexual problems and memory loss. Withdrawal symptoms can be severe, resulting in shaking, sweating, diarrhoea, rapid heartbeat and occasionally seizures. These symptoms are often known as delirium tremens, or DTs, and can be life threatening unless medical help is found urgently.⁽⁶⁾

There are many other risks to physical health from heavy drinking, including liver disease and a greater risk of high blood pressure, stroke, coronary heart disease and heartbeat irregularities.⁽⁷⁾

There are also social effects of alcohol dependence. Dependence on alcohol can rupture personal relationships and cause problems at work. It may lead to long-term effects such as job loss, financial difficulties and in some cases violence, crime and aggression.

ADVICE and GETTING HELP

If you think you have a drinking problem, speak to your GP in the first instance. Your GP will be able to help you understand better what is likely to happen to you as a result of your drinking, and refer you as appropriate to alcohol treatment programmes and support groups that can help you cut down your drinking or stop it altogether. Evidence suggests that attempts to cut down on alcohol or stopping altogether are more successful if they are supported in some way, such as by family and friends, or through counselling or a support group.⁽⁸⁾

Heavy drinking can also mask a range of health problems, such as anxiety, depression and other mental health issues. Your GP will be able to help you with these problems either through medication or referring you to counselling services. See our factsheet on Alcohol and mental health for more information.

Drinkline – 0800 917 8282 – is a confidential helpline for those concerned about their own drinking or that of someone else. They can direct you to local support services.

You can call the national **Alcoholics Anonymous** helpline on 0845 769 7555. You will find local numbers in the phone book or at www.aa-gb.org.uk/regex.shtml.

Al-Anon supports families and friends of alcoholics. Call 020 7403 0888 or visit www.al-anonuk.org.uk.

References

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