

# ALCOHOLISM



## BASIC INFORMATION

### DESCRIPTION

A psychological and physiological dependence on alcohol, resulting in chronic disease and disruption of interpersonal, family and work relationships.

### FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Early stages:

- Low tolerance for anxiety.
- Need for alcohol at the beginning of the day, or at times of stress.
- Insomnia; nightmares.
- Habitual Monday-morning hangovers and frequent absences from work.
- Preoccupation with obtaining alcohol and hiding drinking from family and friends.
- Guilt or irritability when others suggest drinking is excessive.

Late stages:

- Frequent blackouts; memory loss.
- Delirium tremens (tremors, hallucinations, confusion, sweating, rapid heartbeat). These occur most often with alcohol withdrawal.
- Liver disease (yellow skin or eyes).
- Neurological impairment (numbness and tingling in hands and feet, declining sexual interest and potency, confusion, coma).
- Congestive heart failure (shortness of breath, swelling of feet).

### CAUSES

Not fully understood, but include:

- Personality factors, especially dependency, anger, mania, depression or introversion.
- Family influences, especially alcoholic or divorced parents.
- Hereditary factors.
- Social and cultural pressure to drink.
- Body chemistry disturbances (perhaps).

### RISK INCREASES WITH

- Cultural factors. Some ethnic groups have high alcoholism rates for either social or biological reasons.
- Use of recreational drugs.
- Crisis situations, including unemployment, frequent moves, or loss of friends or family.
- Environmental factors such as ready availability, affordability and social acceptance of alcohol in the culture group, work group or social group.
- Too much free unconstructed time, as with retirement.

### PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Use alcohol in moderation—if at all—to provide a healthy role model. Set limits, drink slowly, dilute drinks and don't drink alone.
- Help a spouse, friend or co-worker to admit when an alcohol problem exists, and seek help.

### EXPECTED OUTCOMES

With abstinence (absence of alcohol or drugs), sobriety is a way of life. The lifestyle change is difficult and relapses frequently occur. If determined you can give up alcohol.

### POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Chronic and progressive liver disease.
- Gastric erosion with bleeding; stomach inflammation.
- Neuritis, tremors, seizures and brain impairment; falls at home.
- Inflammation of the pancreas.
- Inflammation of the heart.
- Mental and physical damage to the fetus if a woman drinks during pregnancy (fetal alcohol syndrome).
- Family members of alcoholics may develop psychological symptoms requiring treatment and support groups such as Al-Anon.



## TREATMENT

### GENERAL MEASURES

- Treatment involves short-term care that stops the drinking and long-term help to change the problems that caused the alcoholism.
- May require detoxification (medical help in getting over the physical withdrawal symptoms when drinking is stopped).
- Sometimes, inpatient care at a special treatment center.
- Keep appointments with doctors and counselors.
- Join a local Alcoholics Anonymous group or other support group and attend meetings regularly.
- Reassess your lifestyle, friends, work, and family to identify and alter factors that encourage drinking.

### MEDICATIONS

- Disulfiram (Antabuse), which causes unpleasant physical symptoms when alcohol is consumed, or naltrexone, which lessens the pleasure of alcohol.
- Drugs used for withdrawal symptoms include benzodiazepines, tranquilizers, antipsychotics and anticonvulsants (if seizures occur).

### ACTIVITY

Don't drink and drive.

### DIET

Eat a normal, well-balanced diet. Vitamin supplements may be recommended.



## NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

You or a family member has symptoms of alcoholism.