

## What is alcoholism?

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Alcoholism, or alcohol dependence, is defined by the American Medical Association (AMA) as “a primary, chronic disease with genetic, psychosocial and environmental factors influencing its development and manifestations.”

Alcoholism is characterized by: a prolonged period of frequent, heavy alcohol use, the inability to control drinking once it has begun, the physical dependence manifested by withdrawal symptoms when the individual stops using alcohol, tolerance, or the need to use more and more alcohol to achieve the same effects and a variety of social and/or legal problems arising from alcohol use.

## What causes alcoholism?

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Alcoholism seems to be caused by factors that vary among individuals including:

- Genetic
- Physical
- Psychological
- Environmental
- Social

Genetic factors are considered crucial: A given person’s risk of becoming an alcoholic is greater if a parent is alcoholic.

## What behavioral changes can be associated with alcoholism?

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The immediate physical effects of drinking alcohol range from mild mood changes to complete loss of coordination, vision, balance and speech—any of which can be signals of the temporary systemic poisoning known as

acute alcohol intoxication, or drunkenness. Alcoholism is insidious among young people and the elderly, in part because the symptoms are not easily recognized until the affected person becomes truly alcohol dependent.

Alcoholics employ a range of psychological maneuvers to blame their problems on something other than alcoholism, creating significant barriers to recovery. Historically, alcoholic behavior was blamed on a character flaw or weakness of will; many authorities now consider chronic alcoholism a disease that can affect anyone. An alcoholic feels annoyed when criticized about drinking and will keep and hide alcohol in unlikely places in order to not be detected.

Additional behavioral changes include:

- Solitary drinking
- Unexplained mood swings
- Missing work
- Losing interest in social activities
- Driving under the influence (DUI)
- Blaming others

## What are the dangers associated with alcoholism?

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Consumed in excess, alcohol is poisonous. Chronic alcoholism is a progressive, potentially fatal disease. Physical dependence on alcohol may or may not be obvious to other people. While some chronic alcoholics get very drunk, others exercise enough control to give the appearance of coping with everyday affairs in a near-normal way. The alcoholic’s continual craving for alcohol makes abstinence—an important goal of treatment—extremely difficult.

Alcohol is a factor in a majority of homicides, suicides and traffic accidents. Alcohol abuse also plays a role in many social and domestic problems, from job absenteeism and crimes against property to spousal and child abuse.

## How is alcoholism treated?

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The person with alcoholism often believes that he/she is in control of the situation. Recognizing the problem is the first step to the treatment. Therefore, understanding and accepting the symptoms are crucial. Alcoholism is a serious disease and it is best cured if treated in its early stages.

## What are the psychological damages associated with alcoholism?

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Alcoholism is a disease of the mind. Alcohol is often abused to self-medicate anxiety, depression, irritability and sleep disorders, but these conditions are worsened by drinking. This vicious cycle increases the amount of drinking as the psychological problems become increasingly traumatic and drinking is continued to numb the pain. Alcoholics will often deny having alcoholism symptoms and may drink in secret to cover-up the problem. Dramatic mood swings and aggression also accompany alcoholic drinking.

## What are the health problems associated with alcoholism?

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Large amounts of blood alcohol can impair brain function and eventually cause unconsciousness. Alcoholism can lead to a number of physical ailments, including hypoglycemia, brain and heart damage, enlarged blood vessels in the skin,

chronic gastritis and pancreatitis. Alcoholism can lead to impotence in men, damage to the fetus in pregnant women and an elevated risk of cancer of the larynx, esophagus, stomach, pancreas and upper gastrointestinal tract.

Because many alcoholics do not eat properly, they are likely to have nutritional deficiencies. Heavy drinkers typically have impaired liver function and develop cirrhosis. Vitamins can not be absorbed properly. Deficiency of vitamin B12 (thiamine) causes loss of memory and abnormal coordination which can be fatal if it is left untreated. Anemia can occur due to iron and folic acid deficiency. Large doses of alcohol can raise blood pressure and cause heart problems.

Extreme overdoses can be fatal.

## What are the symptoms of alcoholism?

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Alcoholism is a disease and alcoholism symptoms are indicators that the disease is present in the mind and body.

Other symptoms may include:

- Increased tolerance
- Continued use despite physical problems
- Abdominal pain
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Red eyes, puffy face
- Numbness in the arms or legs
- Swelling of the liver
- Blackouts, not remembering drinking episodes

## Are alcoholics really incapable of stopping drinking?

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A true alcoholic will continue to consume alcohol despite physical and mental difficulties. Expressing a desire to quit and yet unable to do so is an indicator of alcohol dependency. One sign that people often miss is the increased tolerance for alcohol. Alcoholics often attribute their ability to drink excessively large amounts of alcohol to "holding their liquor".

## Take the CAGE questionnaire for alcoholism

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1. Have you ever felt you needed to Cut down on your drinking?
2. Have people Annoyed you by criticizing your drinking?
3. Have you ever felt Guilty about drinking?
4. Have you ever felt you needed a drink first thing in the morning (Eye-opener) to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover?

If you have answered yes to any of the questions in the CAGE questionnaire, or you are worried about your alcohol consumption, it is strongly advisable to consult an alcohol specialist.

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