

JAMA Patient Page:

Do You Have a Drinking Problem?

Although many individuals with drinking problems may consider it a personal issue, the fact is alcohol abuse not only endangers the life and health of the problem drinkers but also affects family, friends, co-workers, and others who come into contact with them.

Out-of-control drinking strains relationships, places a tremendous amount of stress on friends and family, and may even place your job in jeopardy if you can't function well at work. Excessive amounts of alcohol can cause damage to your liver and brain and cause other dangerous health problems.



The good news is that there is hope for those who recognize that they have a problem and seek help. A study in the April 14, 1999, issue of *The Journal of the American Medical Association* evaluated research studies from 1966 to the present to determine what medications are effective in treating adults with alcohol dependence. If you think you or someone you love has a drinking problem, see your doctor about treatment options that are best for you or your loved one.

Types of Alcohol Problems

- **Alcohol abuse:** A pattern of drinking that is accompanied by 1 or more of the following situations within a 12-month period: 1) failure to fulfill major work, school, or home responsibilities; 2) drinking in situations that are physically dangerous, such as while driving a car or operating machinery; 3) recurring alcohol-related legal problems, such as being arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol or for physically hurting someone while drunk; or 4) continued drinking despite having ongoing relationship problems that are caused by or worsened by the effects of alcohol.
- **Alcoholism:** Pattern of drinking that includes: 1) strong craving for alcohol; 2) loss of control and inability to stop drinking once begun; 3) suffering from withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, shakiness, and anxiety after a period of heavy drinking; and 4) needing increasing amounts of alcohol in order to feel "high."

Where to Get Help

Self-help organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous provide fellowship and support in recovering from alcohol dependence. Other organizations such as Al-Anon Family Groups, Inc., and Alateen offer support and information to family and friends of alcoholics. The organizations promise confidentiality and anonymity. (See "[For More Information](#)")

Alcoholism Treatment

There is no complete cure for alcoholism, but it can be treated. The type of treatment depends on the severity of the problem and the resources that are available in your area. Treatment may include:

- **Acute withdrawal and detoxification:** The medical process of safely getting alcohol out of your system
- **Prescription medication:** Can help prevent relapse to drinking once you have stopped
- **Individual or group counseling:** Can include families and partners, who oftentimes also need help to cope with the stress of dealing with a family member with alcohol problems

If you think you or someone you love may have a problem with alcohol, talk to your doctor about ways to overcome the problem.

For More Information

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
The National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information
800/729-6686
800/487-4899 (TTY)
- Alcoholics Anonymous
212/870-3400
- Al-Anon Family Groups, Inc.
888/4-AL-ANON (M-F 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. ET)

Additional Sources: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, Alcoholics Anonymous[®], The National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information

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