

Health Bulletin:

Alcohol — Risks and Benefits



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#6 in a series of Health Bulletins on issues of pressing interest to all New Yorkers

Healthy vs. Unhealthy Drinking—Which Is Which?

Every person should understand the effects of alcohol on health.

The Risks

- Excessive drinking is unhealthy, and increases the risk of illness and death. Excessive drinking is defined as:
 - More than 4 drinks in one setting or 14 drinks in one week by men; or
 - More than 3 drinks in one setting or 7 drinks in one week by women.
- Excessive drinking increases the risks of:
 - Alcoholism (alcohol dependency).
 - Cirrhosis of the liver.
 - Hepatitis.
 - Osteoporosis.
 - Hypertension.
 - Enlarged heart or weakening of the heart muscle.
 - Cancers of the mouth, throat, esophagus, liver, breast, and colon.
 - Suppression of the immune system.
 - Pneumonia and other infections.
 - Accidents and injuries.
 - Committing or being the victim of violence.
 - Depression, dementia, and other mental disorders.
 - Suicide.
- People with a family history of alcoholism may be predisposed to alcohol problems.
- *For people who drink excessively, the risks of alcohol far outweigh the benefits.*

The Benefits

- Most adults are able to drink safely, and many may benefit from **moderate** alcohol consumption—*defined as no more than one or two drinks a day.*
- The beneficial health effects of moderate drinking include:
 - Reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, including heart attack and stroke.
 - These benefits may be more pronounced in men than women.

**Each of these is considered “one drink.”
All contain the same amount of alcohol:**

- One 12-oz. glass, bottle, or can of beer or ale.
- One 5-oz. glass of wine (not including fortified wines).
- One 1½-oz. “shot” of 80-proof liquor (straight or in a mixed drink).

What Is Alcoholism?

- Alcoholism, or alcohol dependence, is a chronic, often progressive disease with these symptoms:
 - **Craving**—A strong urge to drink.
 - **Loss of control**—Being unable to stop drinking once started.
 - **Physical dependence**—Withdrawal symptoms after stopping (nausea, sweating, shakiness, anxiety).
 - **Tolerance**—The need to drink greater amounts of alcohol to feel its effects.
- A person doesn’t have to be an alcoholic to have an alcohol problem.
 - An “alcohol problem” is any level of drinking that harms the drinker directly, jeopardizes the drinker’s well-being, or places others at risk.
 - Even moderate drinking can sometimes fit this definition, depending on the situation.

Some People Shouldn’t Drink

- Anyone who will drive or operate machinery.
- Women who are pregnant or trying to become pregnant.
- Anyone with a personal history of alcoholism or drug addiction.
- People with uncontrolled diabetes, congestive heart failure, or chronic stomach, liver, or pancreas problems.
- Persons taking prescription or over-the-counter medications that can interact with alcohol—check with a doctor or pharmacist.
- Anyone under legal drinking age—*especially people 18 and younger.*
 - 20% of alcohol in the U.S. is consumed by underage drinkers.
 - The average age teens start drinking has dropped to 14.
 - The earlier a person starts drinking, the greater the likelihood of alcohol dependence.

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How to Spot a Problem

Not everyone who drinks regularly has a drinking problem. However, a “yes” answer to any one of these questions indicates that there may be a risk:

- Do you drink alone when you feel angry or sad?
- Does your drinking ever make you late for work or other appointments?
- Does your drinking worry your family or friends?
- Do you ever drink after telling yourself that you won't?
- Did you ever forget what you did while you were drinking?
- Do you ever get headaches or have a hangover after you've been drinking?

Also try the **CAGE** test – there may be a problem if the answer to any one of these questions is “yes”:

Have you ever:

- Thought you should **C**ut down on your drinking?
- Become **A**nnoyed when asked to stop drinking?
- Feel scared, bad, or **G**uilty about your drinking?
- Taken an **E**ye-opener drink to feel better in the morning?

Recovery From Addiction Is Possible

- Substance abuse, including alcoholism, is a *disease*—not a moral failing.
- Stopping substance abuse and moving into recovery often involves setbacks.
 - For a substance abuser, admitting the problem is often very difficult.
 - This is called “denial,” and is characteristic of the disease.
- Attempts to get and stay sober, even with relapses, eventually become building blocks for a new life in recovery.
 - People in recovery often need ongoing support for extended periods.
 - Many treatment options are available—speak with a doctor or substance abuse counselor.
- People with an alcohol problem need the support of friends and family.
 - Try to bring the affected person to a doctor or other health-care provider.
 - Take care of yourself—consider going to educational or support groups (such as Al-Anon or Alateen).
 - Don't give up. People with substance abuse problems can and do improve over time.

More Information

- Call 1-800-LIFENET (1-800-543-3638) or call 311 and ask for LIFENET, for help with alcohol or other substance abuse problems.
- National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information: www.samsha.org or 1-800-729-6686.
- Alcoholics Anonymous: www.nyintergroup.org or 212-647-1680.
- Al-Anon and Alateen: www.nycalanon.org or 212-941-0094.

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News

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