



## BASIC FACTS ABOUT DRUGS: ALCOHOL

### What is Alcohol?

Alcohol is the oldest and most widely used drug in the world. Nearly half of all Americans over the age of 12 are consumers of alcohol. Most people don't have a problem with alcoholism but there are an estimated 10 to 15 million alcoholics or problem drinkers in the United States, with more than 100,000 deaths each year attributed to alcohol. What most people don't realize is that among the nation's alcoholics and problem drinkers are as many as 4.5 million adolescents



Alcohol is the name to given a variety of related compounds; the drinkable form is ethanol, or ethyl alcohol. It is a powerful, addictive, central nervous system depressant produced by the action of yeast cells on carbohydrates in fruits and grains. A liquid that is taken orally, alcohol is often consumed in large quantities. Surveys of adolescent and young adult drinkers indicate that they are particularly likely to drink heavily with the intention of getting drunk—often every time they drink.

There are three basic types of alcoholic drinks.

<b>Beer</b> is made from fermented grains and has an alcohol content of three to six percent.	<b>Wine</b> is made from fermented fruits and has an alcohol content of 11 to 14 percent. Some wine drinks, such as wine coolers, have fruit juice and sugar added, lowering alcohol content to between four and seven percent. Fortified wines, such as port, have alcohol added, bringing alcohol content to between 18 and 20 percent.	<b>Liquor</b> is made by distilling a fermented product to yield a drink that usually contains 40 to 50 percent alcohol. The alcohol content in liquor is sometimes indicated by degrees of proof, which in the United States is a figure twice as high as the percentage. Thus, 80-proof liquor is 40 percent alcohol.
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A 12-ounce glass of beer, a 5-ounce glass of wine, and a 1.5-ounce shot of liquor all contain the same amount of alcohol and, therefore, have an equal effect on the drinker. All three forms of alcohol have the same potential for intoxication and addiction.

### How Does it Affect You?

**When a person consumes alcohol**, the drug acts on nerve cells deep in the brain. Alcohol initially serves as a stimulant, then induces feelings of relaxation and reduced anxiety. Consumption of two or three drinks in an hour can impair judgment, lower inhibitions, and induce mild euphoria. Five drinks consumed in two hours may raise the blood alcohol level to 0.10 percent, high enough to be considered legally intoxicated in every state. Once a drinker stops drinking, his or her blood alcohol level decreases by about 0.01 percent per hour.

## Signs and symptoms

<b>alcohol use and intoxication:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Smell of alcohol on breath</li><li>• Irritability</li><li>• Euphoria</li><li>• Loss of physical coordination</li><li>• Inappropriate or violent behavior</li><li>• Loss of balance</li><li>• Unsteady gait</li><li>• Slurred and/or incoherent speech</li><li>• Loss of consciousness</li><li>• Slowed thinking</li><li>• Depression</li><li>• Impaired short-term memory</li><li>• Blackouts</li></ul>	<b>alcohol withdrawal, experienced by alcoholics and problem drinkers:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tremors</li><li>• Agitation</li><li>• Anxiety and panic attacks</li><li>• Paranoia and delusions</li><li>• Hallucinations (usually visual)</li><li>• Nausea and vomiting</li><li>• Increased body temperature</li><li>• Elevated blood pressure and heart rate</li><li>• Convulsions</li><li>• Seizures</li></ul>
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### What are the Dangers of Alcohol Abuse?

In addition to risk of injury or death as a result of accident or violence, alcohol abuse can cause or worsen many physical and mental disorders.

**Neurological** dangers include impaired vision and impaired motor coordination, memory defects, hallucinations, blackouts, and seizures. Long-term consumption can result in permanent damage to the brain.

**Cardiological** problems include elevated blood pressure and heart rate, risk of stroke and heart failure.

**Respiratory** dangers include respiratory depression and failure, pneumonia, tuberculosis, and lung abscesses. Additionally, alcohol abuse increases the risk of mouth and throat cancer.

**Liver** disease caused by chronic alcohol abuse, including alcoholic fatty liver, hepatitis, and cirrhosis, kills 25,000 Americans each year.

Other physiological dangers include damage to the **gastrointestinal system** (including duodenal ulcers, reflux, and diarrhea), the **pancreas**, and the **kidneys**. In addition, alcohol consumption may cause malnutrition, disrupt the absorption of nutrients in food, and suppress the **immune system**, thus increasing the potential for illness.

**Psychological** dangers include impaired judgment and verbal ability, apathy, introversion, antisocial behavior, inability to concentrate, and deterioration of relationships with family, friends, and co-workers.

**Alcohol is an especially dangerous drug for pregnant women.** Drinking during pregnancy raises the risk of low-birth weight babies and intrauterine growth retardation, increasing the danger of infection, feeding difficulties, and long-term developmental problems. Heavy drinking during the early months of pregnancy can result in the birth of babies with fetal alcohol syndrome. These infants are likely to have irreversible physical abnormalities.

### What is Alcoholism?

Chronic abuse of alcohol can lead to addiction or alcoholism. **The behavior of abusers and the consequences of that behavior are better indicators of alcoholism than how often or how much a person may drink.** Alcohol addiction can be characterized by increased tolerance, causing the abuser to drink greater amounts to achieve the same desired effect. When an alcoholic stops drinking, he or she will typically experience the symptoms of withdrawal.