

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ALCOHOL USE

In the Clinic
Annals of Internal Medicine

What Is Unhealthy Alcohol Use?

Unhealthy alcohol use refers to drinking that causes or may cause physical, psychological, or social harm. Alcohol use is the seventh leading cause of death globally and is often underrecognized and undertreated. There are various levels of alcohol use, including:

- Lower-risk use (drinking below a level believed to cause physical or psychosocial harm)
- At-risk use (drinking at a level that may be harmful to your health [≥ 4 drinks/day or ≥ 8 drinks/week for women and ≥ 5 drinks/day or ≥ 15 drinks/week for men])
- Heavy episodic drinking (≥ 4 drinks [for women] or ≥ 5 drinks [for men] on a single occasion)
- Alcohol use disorder (a pattern characterized by craving and dependence, use despite negative consequences, and loss of control)

What Medical Conditions Are Associated With or Worsened by Alcohol Use?

Alcohol use has no clear benefits. Unhealthy alcohol use has negative effects on health and is associated with worsening of existing health conditions. Unhealthy alcohol use may impair mental health and cognition, nutrition, engagement in care, and medication adherence.

Medical conditions that are associated with or worsened by alcohol use include:

- Injuries and interpersonal violence
- Infectious diseases
- Cancer
- Cardiovascular disease
- Digestive disease
- Neurologic and psychiatric disease
- Respiratory disease
- Endocrine disease
- Pregnancy-related conditions (fetal alcohol syndrome, miscarriage)

What Are the Risk Factors?

Genetic and environmental risk factors are associated with unhealthy alcohol use. Starting to drink at an earlier age can lead to heavier alcohol use later in life and increased risk for alcohol-related injuries. Older patients with unhealthy alcohol use are more likely to be harmed by alcohol's effect on cognition and interaction with other existing health issues or medications. Although alcohol use is more common in men, women are more vulnerable to harms. Lower socioeconomic groups are at risk for greater harms associated with alcohol use. Groups that are marginalized on the basis of race, ethnicity, or sexuality may also experience more harm from alcohol use.



How Is Unhealthy Alcohol Use Diagnosed?

You will complete a questionnaire or your doctor will ask you a short series of questions about how much alcohol you drink and how often. These questions will help determine your level of risk. If you are diagnosed with unhealthy alcohol use, your doctor will ask you more questions about your medical history, which might include questions about family history of mental illness, substance use disorders, and other substance use (nicotine, cannabis, prescription and over-the-counter drugs). Along with these screening questions, a physical examination and laboratory testing can also help with diagnosis and understanding the severity of unhealthy alcohol use.

How Is Unhealthy Alcohol Use Treated?

If you are diagnosed with unhealthy alcohol use, your treatment will depend on the level of severity and health risks. In general, your doctor will speak with you about your specific risk levels and advise you about drinking less or stopping altogether. Any reduction in alcohol use is associated with improved survival, with the best effects achieved with abstinence. Treatment options for those diagnosed with moderate to severe alcohol use disorder should include medications combined with counseling and/or support groups. Treatment of withdrawal symptoms, other substance use disorders, and mental health disorders may require inpatient or more specialized care.

Questions for My Doctor

- How do I know if I am drinking too much or too often?
- What are the signs and symptoms of alcohol withdrawal?
- How often should I see you to discuss treatment for unhealthy alcohol use?
- Should I be on medication to help treat alcohol use disorder?
- Does alcohol interact with any of my medications?
- What vaccinations should I get to protect me from infections?
- Are there additional resources to help me with unhealthy alcohol use?

For More Information



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov/alcohol/fact-sheets/alcohol-use.htm

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/alcohol-use-facts-resources-fact-sheet.pdf