

Alcohol is legal for adults over the age of 21 in most states, and the majority of people who drink alcohol do so responsibly. Yet, alcohol is one of the most commonly abused substances in America—nearly one in five people will experience problematic alcohol abuse at some point in their lifetime. Someone who gets sick, injured or arrested due to their drinking—or who experiences problems at work, school or home due to being intoxicated or hung-over—likely has a problem with alcohol.

What happens when a person abuses alcohol?

After using alcohol, a person may begin to feel “drunk.” This can involve peaceful feelings such as being happy, silly or confident. However, people with mental illness are more likely to also experience negative emotions such as depressed mood or anxiety.

People who regularly abuse alcohol may become addicted (e.g., their body becomes physically dependent on the substance). An addicted person who abruptly stops drinking may experience alcohol withdrawal, a medical emergency requiring immediate treatment. Withdrawal can lead to heart problems, seizures or delirium tremens (an acute delirious state), all which can be fatal.

What is the relationship between alcohol and mental illness?

The relationship between alcohol abuse and mental illness is complex, and the treatment of both together is more complicated than the treatment of either condition alone. Certain groups of people with mental illness—including males, individuals of lower socioeconomic status and military veterans—are at increased risk of abusing alcohol. Recent studies have suggested that nearly one-third of people with mental illness experience alcohol abuse. Conversely, more than one-third of all alcohol abusers are also battling mental illness.

Scientific data is clear that regular alcohol abuse is linked with increased risk of legal troubles and jail time, difficulties at school and at work, as well as abuse of other drugs.

Alcohol abuse results in a worse prognosis for a person with mental illness. People who are actively using are less likely to follow through with the treatment plans they create with their mental health professionals (e.g., adhering to their medication regimens or keeping appointments), which leads to more psychiatric hospitalizations and other adverse outcomes. Active users are similarly less likely to receive adequate medical care and are more likely to experience severe medical complications and early death. People with mental illness who abuse alcohol are also at increased risk of impulsive and potentially violent acts, and they are more likely to both attempt suicide and to die from their suicide attempts.

People with mental illness and active alcohol abuse are less likely to achieve lasting sobriety. They may be more likely to experience severe complications of their substance

abuse, to end up in legal trouble from their substance use and to become physically dependent on alcohol.

What is the relationship between alcohol and medical illness?

The majority of people who abuse alcohol are at risk of significant side effects. Heavy alcohol abuse remains the number one cause of liver cirrhosis in America. Cirrhosis can lead to the need for liver transplantation or death. Alcohol abuse is also associated with heart disease, diabetes and certain types of cancer

In younger people, alcohol can also be associated with sexual dysfunction and infertility. Women who abuse alcohol while pregnant are more likely to experience complications during their pregnancies and to deliver babies with birth defects (including but not limited to fetal alcohol syndrome).

What treatments are available for people with alcohol abuse and dependency?

Many people seek assistance in going through the process of stopping their alcohol abuse. This can include inpatient detoxification, which can involve admission to a hospital—either a general hospital or a detoxification facility—and treatment with the appropriate medications to help avoid serious complications of alcohol withdrawal.

After a safe detoxification is achieved, people who are newly sober or who are trying to avoid relapse on alcohol may enter inpatient rehabilitation centers or supportive housing (e.g., sober houses, group homes or residential treatment facilities). Others may choose to return home.

Therapy can be an important part of maintaining their sobriety. This can include self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous or SMART Recovery. Individual therapy (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy) can also be useful. Another form of therapy called “motivational interviewing”—an interactive, patient-centered model of treatment focused on finding inspiration for behavioral change—has also been found to be effective.

Although there is no medication that can cure alcoholism, a number of medications have been approved by the US-FDA for treatment of alcohol abuse and dependency. These include disulfiram (Antabuse), acamprosate (Campral) and naltrexone (Revia, Vivitrol).

With the empathic and non-judgmental support of friends and family, combined with effective psychiatric treatment, many people with alcohol abuse and mental illness will be able to actively participate in their recovery journey.

Reviewed by Jacob L. Freedman, M.D., and Ken Duckworth, M.D., February 2013