

## *Drinking, Safe or Risky*

Do you enjoy a drink now and then? Many of us do, often when socializing with friends and family. Drinking can be beneficial or harmful, depending on your age and health status, the situation, and how much you drink.

According to a nationwide survey by the National Institutes of Health on “Alcohol Use and Its Consequences” they determined that:

- 7 in 10 adults drink at low risk levels or do not drink at all
- 3 in 10 adults drink at levels that put them at risk for alcoholism, liver disease and other health problems (2 drinks a day for men or 1 for women)

Many people are surprised to learn what counts as a drink. In the United States, a “Standard” drink is any drink that contains about 0.6 fluid ounces or 14 grams of “Pure alcohol.” Each of the following drinks contains approximately the same amount of alcohol and counts as a single drink:

- 12 fluid ounces of regular beer (about 5% alcohol)
- 8-9 fluid ounces of malt liquor (about 7% alcohol)
- 5 fluid ounces of table wine (about 12% alcohol)
- 1.5 fluid ounces of 80 proof distilled spirits (gin, rum, tequila, vodka, whiskey etc)

Not all drinking is harmful. You may have heard that regular light to moderate drinking (from ½ drink a day up to 1 drink a day for women and 2 for men) can even be good for the heart. With at-risk or heavy drinking, however, any potential benefits are outweighed by greater risks including:

**Injuries.** Drinking too much increases your chances of being injured or even killed. Alcohol is a factor, for example, in about 60% of fatal burn injuries, drowning, and homicides; 50% of severe trauma injuries and sexual assaults; and 40% of fatal motor vehicle crashes, suicides, and fatal falls.

**Health problems.** Heavy drinkers have a greater risk of liver disease, heart disease, sleep disorders, depression, stroke, bleeding from the stomach, sexually transmitted infections from unsafe sex, and several types of cancer. They may also have problems managing diabetes, high blood pressure, and other conditions.

**Birth defects.** Drinking during pregnancy can cause brain damage and other serious problems in the baby. Because it is not yet known whether any amount of alcohol is safe for a developing baby, women who are pregnant or may become pregnant should not drink.

**Alcohol use disorders.** Generally known as alcoholism and alcohol abuse, alcohol use disorders are medical conditions that doctors can diagnose when a patient’s drinking causes distress or harm. In the United States, about 18 million people have an alcohol use disorder.

Even moderate levels of drinking (up to 2 drinks per day for men or 1 for women) can be too much in some circumstances. It's safest to avoid alcohol if you are:

- Planning to drive a vehicle or operate machinery
- Taking medications that interact with alcohol
- Managing a medical condition that can be made worse by drinking
- Pregnant or trying to become pregnant

Quitting is strongly advised if you:

- Try cutting down but cannot stay within the limits you set
- Have had an alcohol use disorder or now have symptoms
- Have a physical or mental condition that is caused or worsened by drinking
- Are taking medications that interacts with alcohol

Advances in the treatment of alcoholism mean that patients now have more choices and health professionals have more tools to help with treatment using:

**Medications to treat alcoholism.** Newer medications can make it easier to quit drinking by offsetting changes in the brain caused by alcoholism. These options (Naltrexone, Topiramate, and Acamprostate) don't make you sick if you drink, as does an older medication (Disulfiram). None of these medications are addictive, and it's helpful to combine them with support groups or alcohol counseling.

**Alcohol counseling.** "Talk therapy" also works well. There are several counseling approaches that are about equally effective —12 step, cognitive-behavioral, motivational enhancement, or a combination. Getting help in itself appears to be more important than the particular approach used, as long as it offers empathy, avoids heavy confrontation, strengthens motivation, and provides concrete ways to change drinking behavior.

**Specialized, intensive treatment programs.** Some people will need more intensive programs. If you need a referral to a program, ask your doctor.

Remember, small changes can make a big difference in reducing your chances of having alcohol-related health problems. It is important to seek medical help to plan a safe recovery from too much alcohol.

It's a good idea to discuss the different options available with your Personal Care Doctor at your next visit so they can direct you into the care option that is right for you. Or better yet, schedule a visit now to discuss this issue and get on the road to treatment so that you can live a healthier, happier life style beginning now!