

# ALCOHOL ABUSE

*A Mental Health Educational Series brought to you by:  
Innovative Psychological Consultants*

## Description

The use of alcohol in our culture is pervasive. For most people their use of alcohol is social or recreational and is secondary to the event and situations they are engaging in. For some 10% of the American population their use of alcohol becomes abusive or has already reached the level of dependence. There are four levels of alcohol use: abstinence, social use, abuse, and dependence. Social use pertains to people who drink for the taste rather than the effect (glass of wine with dinner or a dessert drink). It can be difficult to differentiate between those who abuse and those who have crossed the line to dependence, both of which are problematic. One benchmark of problematic drinking stipulates that men who drink more than 4 drinks in one sitting or more than 14 drinks in a week and women who drink more than 3 drinks in one sitting or more than 7 drinks in a week, likely have abuse or dependence problems.

## Symptoms & Features

Abuse and dependence have different symptoms. Alcohol abuse is problematic drinking leading to impaired functioning or consequences in one of the following life areas: 1) work, school, or home, 2) continued drinking in physically hazardous situations, 3) drinking resulting in legal problems, 4) continued use despite recurrent social or interpersonal problems. Alcohol dependence is a problematic pattern of drinking resulting in 3 of the following 7 symptoms in a 12 month period of time: 1) tolerance (a need for an increase in the amount of alcohol to get the same desired effect), 2) withdrawal (shakes, sweats, etc. in the absence of drinking, 3) drinking in larger amounts or over longer time than intended, 4) a persistent desire to cut down, control, or quit, 5) great deal of time spent in obtaining alcohol or recovering from its effects, 6) important social, occupational, and recreational activities are reduced or given up for alcohol, 7) drinking despite physical/medical problems that may be worsened by drinking.

Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant that in the short term can result in impaired coordination, lowered heart rate and blood pressure, and impaired judgment. In the long term it can result in depression, ulcers, alcoholism, cirrhosis of the liver, pancreatitis, and Korsakoff's syndrome. A family history of addiction puts drinkers at 4-5X higher risk of developing dependence.

## Treatment

Alcohol abuse is often intervened upon with educational programs intended to deter and reduce consumption before abuse develops into dependence. Alcohol dependence is typically treated with abstinence based treatment programs. Sometimes detoxification is required in the case of withdrawal symptoms to prevent serious complications such as seizures, heart attacks, or delirium tremens. People are either directed to in-patient (28 days typically) or out-patient (60 hours occurring 3-4X weekly for 4-5 weeks) chemical dependency programs. Treatment occurs in a group therapy format with focus on breaking through denial of one's problem, education around the disease of alcoholism, and providing people with tools to remain abstinent. There are also some medicinal treatment aids that are occasionally used such as Antabuse, which causes alcohol consumers to become violently ill if they drink, or Campral, designed to reduce cravings for alcohol.

## What Can I Do To Help Myself

If you think you may have a drinking problem you should get a chemical assessment by a specialist at I.P.C. who performs chemical dependency evaluations. In addition, you can read about alcohol abuse and its treatment. You can also check out community resources such Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) for assistance in remaining sober.