



Drug and Alcohol Awareness

Weddings, birthdays, holidays – we often mark the most significant events of our lives with glasses raised. For many of us, moderate drinking during social occasions is the norm. But for others, moderate consumption can turn into overuse, abuse and sometimes even addiction.

Substance abuse and addiction are common in the United States. In 2006, almost 23 million Americans ages 12 and older – more than 9 percent of the population – had substance abuse problems.¹

Do you think you have a drinking problem?

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you drink alone when you feel angry or sad?
- Does your drinking ever make you late for work?
- Does your drinking worry your family?
- Do you ever drink after telling yourself you won't?
- Do you ever forget what you did while you were drinking?
- Do you get headaches or have a hangover after you've been drinking?

If you answer yes to any of these questions, you may have a drinking problem. Talk to your doctor about it. ¹³

Why people consume drugs or alcohol

People use alcohol and drugs as a way to alter their mood and relieve stress. Consuming drugs or alcohol can initially make the user feel better – more powerful, self-confident, energized or relaxed. Over time, people may need to use more of the drug or use it more frequently to feel its effects. Seeking and taking the drug becomes their primary concern. At this point, the drug may cause physical changes in areas of the brain that control judgment, decision-making, learning, memory and self-control.²

Alcohol and your health

We've all heard about the supposed benefits of drinking red wine, but do those benefits outweigh the drawbacks? The answer is, it depends – on your age, the state of your health, the medications you're taking and how much you drink.³ Research has shown that moderate drinkers are less likely to die from coronary artery disease than are people who drink heavily or who don't drink at all.⁴ But heavy drinking increases the risk of heart and liver disease, depression, stroke, sleeping disorders and certain cancers.⁵ Alcohol abuse also can lead to⁶:

- Damage to the brain, pancreas and kidneys
- High blood pressure, heart attacks and strokes
- Impotence and infertility
- Birth defects and fetal alcohol syndrome
- Premature aging

Illegal drug use

Although drug use isn't a socially accepted activity like drinking alcohol is, almost 19.9 million Americans were using illicit drugs in 2007.⁷ An estimated 40 percent of adults in the United States will use an illegal drug – street drugs like marijuana and cocaine – at some point in their lives.⁸ When abused, legal substances such as prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications and household chemicals can be as harmful or addictive as their illegal counterparts.⁹

The information contained in this flier is provided for educational purposes only, and should not be interpreted as medical advice. Please consult your doctor for medical advice about changes that may affect your health and before taking any medications or beginning any lifestyle program. Some services may not be covered under your health plan. Please refer to your Group Certificate and Schedule of Benefits for details concerning benefits, procedures and exclusions.

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Most drugs interact with the regions of the brain that control movement, emotions, motivation and pleasure. The drugs rush dopamine to these regions, leaving the user feeling exhilarated and euphoric. When a person continues to abuse the drug, the brain responds by producing less dopamine or reducing the number of dopamine receptors. That means the person must use larger amounts of the drug to get the dopamine high.¹⁰

Is addiction inevitable?

Drinking alcohol or using drugs doesn't necessarily mean you'll become addicted. But even though taking a drink or a drug is a voluntary action, continuing to use these substances can lead to becoming physically or psychologically dependent on them.¹¹

You may be concerned about your own use of drugs and alcohol or that of a friend or family member. Here are just some of the many physical and behavioral signs to watch out for¹²:

- Change in sleep patterns
- Bloodshot eyes
- Sudden weight loss or gain
- Poor hygiene
- Emotional instability
- Missing work or school
- Secretive behavior

Resources

For information on understanding alcohol and drug usage, treatment and prevention, visit these sources:

- National Institute on Drug Abuse: nida.nih.gov
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: niaaa.gov
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: samhsa.gov
- National Council on Alcohol and Drug Dependence: ncadd.org
- Partnership for a Drug-Free America: drugfree.org

Sources: (1) Partnership for a Drug-Free America, *You Are Not Alone* (October 3, 2008), drugfree.org. (2) National Institute on Drug Abuse, *The Science of Addiction* (September 17, 2008), drugabuse.gov. (3) Rethinking Drinking, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, *Alcohol and Your Health* (accessed June 18, 2009), rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov. (4) National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, *FAQs for the General Public* (February 2007), niaaa.nih.gov. (5) Rethinking Drinking, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, *What Are the Risks?* (accessed June 2009), rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov. (6) National Clearinghouse for Drug and Alcohol Information, *What You Can Do About Drug Abuse in America* (accessed July 2009), ncadi.samhsa.gov. (7) U.S. Department of Labor, *General Workplace Impact* (accessed June 2009), dol.gov. (8) Partnership for a Drug-Free America, *Alcohol and Drug Problems Overview* (April 24, 2008), drugfree.org. (9) National Institute on Drug Abuse, *Commonly Abused Drugs* (May 5, 2009), drugabuse.gov. (10) National Institute on Drug Abuse, *Understanding Drug Abuse and Addiction* (May 6, 2009), drugabuse.gov. (11) U.S. Department of Labor, *Addiction (Dependence)* (accessed June 2009), dol.gov. (12) Partnership for a Drug-Free America, *Signs Someone Is Using Drugs or Alcohol* (June 16, 2006), drugfree.org. (13) National Clearinghouse for Drug and Alcohol Information, *How to Cut Down on Your Drinking* (accessed May 2009), ncadi.samhsa.gov.

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