

# Alcoholism

Nabil A. Salhab, MD.

## Alcoholism Definition

- Alcoholism is a chronic disease that makes your body dependent on alcohol. You may be obsessed with alcohol and unable to control how much you drink, even though your drinking is causing serious problems with your relationships, health, work and finances.
- It's possible to have a problem with alcohol, but not display all the characteristics of alcoholism. This is known as "**alcohol abuse**," which means you engage in excessive drinking that causes health or social problems, but you aren't dependent on alcohol and haven't fully lost control over the use of alcohol.

## Symptoms

- Before treatment or recovery, most people with alcoholism *deny* that they have a drinking problem. Other signs of alcoholism and alcohol abuse include:
- Drinking alone or in secret
- Being unable to limit the amount of alcohol you drink
- Not remembering conversations or commitments, sometimes referred to as "blacking out"
- Making a ritual of having drinks before, with or after dinner and becoming annoyed when this ritual is disturbed or questioned
- Losing interest in activities and hobbies that used to bring pleasure

## Symptoms

- Feeling a need or compulsion to drink
- Irritability when your usual drinking time nears, especially if alcohol isn't available
- Keeping alcohol in unlikely places at home, at work or in the car
- Gulping drinks, ordering doubles, becoming intoxicated intentionally to feel good or drinking to feel "normal"
- Having legal problems or problems with relationships, employment or finances
- Building a tolerance to alcohol so that you need an increasing number of drinks to feel alcohol's effects
- Experiencing physical withdrawal symptoms — such as nausea, sweating and shaking — if you don't drink

- People who abuse alcohol may experience many of the same signs and symptoms as people who are dependent on alcohol.
- However, alcohol abusers don't feel the same compulsion to drink and usually don't experience physical withdrawal symptoms when they don't drink.
- A dependence on alcohol also creates a tolerance to alcohol and the inability to control your drinking.

- If you've ever wondered if your own alcohol consumption crosses the line of abuse or dependence, ask yourself these questions:
- Do you need a drink as soon as you get up?
- Do you feel guilty about your drinking?
- Do you think you need to cut back on your alcohol consumption?
- Are you annoyed when other people comment on or criticize your drinking habits?

## Causes of Alcoholism

- Alcohol addiction — physical dependence on alcohol — occurs gradually. Over time, drinking alcohol alters the balance of some chemicals in your brain, such as gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), which inhibits impulsiveness, and glutamate, which excites the nervous system.
- Alcohol also raises the levels of *dopamine* in the brain, which is associated with the pleasurable aspects of drinking alcohol. Excessive, long-term drinking can deplete or increase the levels of some of these chemicals, causing your body to crave alcohol to restore good feelings or to avoid negative feelings.

- **Genetics.** Certain genetic factors may cause a person to be vulnerable to alcoholism or other addictions.
- **Emotional state.** High levels of stress, anxiety or emotional pain can lead some people to drink alcohol to block out the turmoil. Certain stress hormones may be associated with alcoholism.
- **Psychological factors.** Having low self-esteem or depression may make you more likely to abuse alcohol. Having friends or a close partner who drinks regularly — but who may not abuse alcohol — could promote excessive drinking on your part. It may be difficult for you to distance yourself from these "enablers" or at least from their drinking habits.
- **Social and cultural factors.** The glamorous way that drinking alcohol is portrayed in advertising and in the media may send the message that it's OK to drink excessively.

## Risk Factors

- **Age.** People who begin drinking at an early age — by age 16 or earlier — are at a higher risk of alcohol dependence or abuse.
- **Genetics.** Your genetic makeup may increase your risk of alcohol dependency.
- **Sex.** Men are more likely to become dependent on or abuse alcohol than are women.
- **Family history.** The risk of alcoholism is higher for people who had a parent or parents who abused alcohol.
- **Emotional disorders.** Being severely depressed or having anxiety places you at a greater risk of abusing alcohol. Adults with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder also may be more likely to become dependent on alcohol.

## Tests and Diagnosis

- To be diagnosed with alcoholism, you must meet criteria spelled out in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DMS), published by the American Psychiatric Association.
- Criteria for alcoholism to be diagnosed include a pattern of alcohol abuse leading to significant impairment or distress, as indicated by **three or more** of the following at any time **during one 12-month period:**

- **Tolerance**, indicated by an increase in the amount of alcohol you need to feel intoxicated. As alcoholism progresses, the amount leading to intoxication can also decrease as a result of damage to your liver or central nervous system.
- **Withdrawal symptoms** when you cut down or stop using alcohol. These signs and symptoms include tremors, insomnia, nausea and anxiety. You may drink more alcohol in order to avoid those symptoms.
- **Drinking more alcohol** or drinking over a longer period of time than you intended.

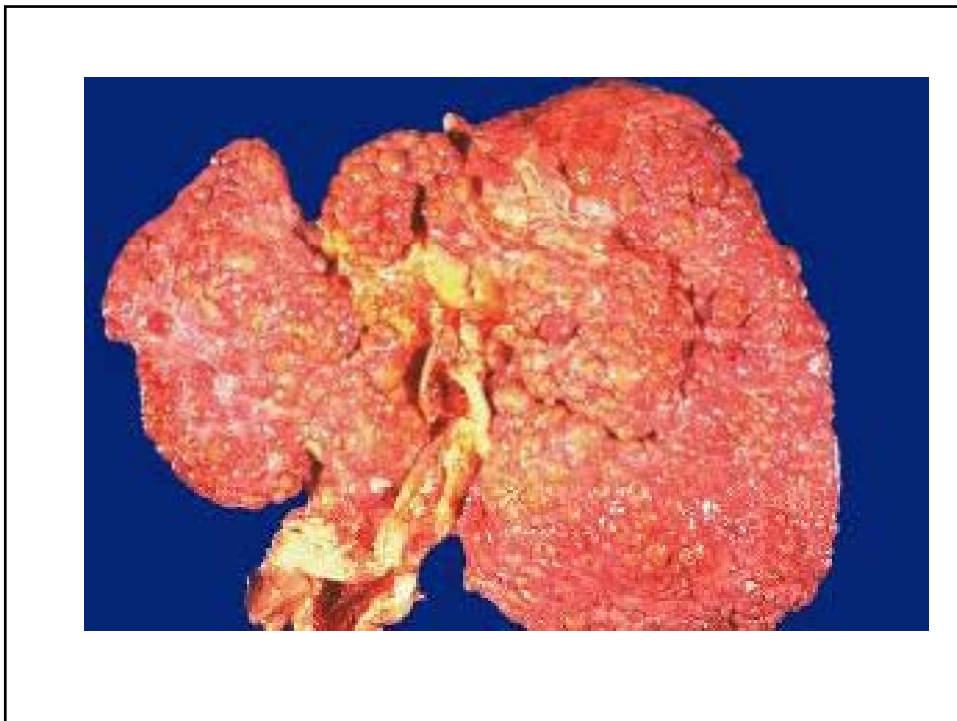
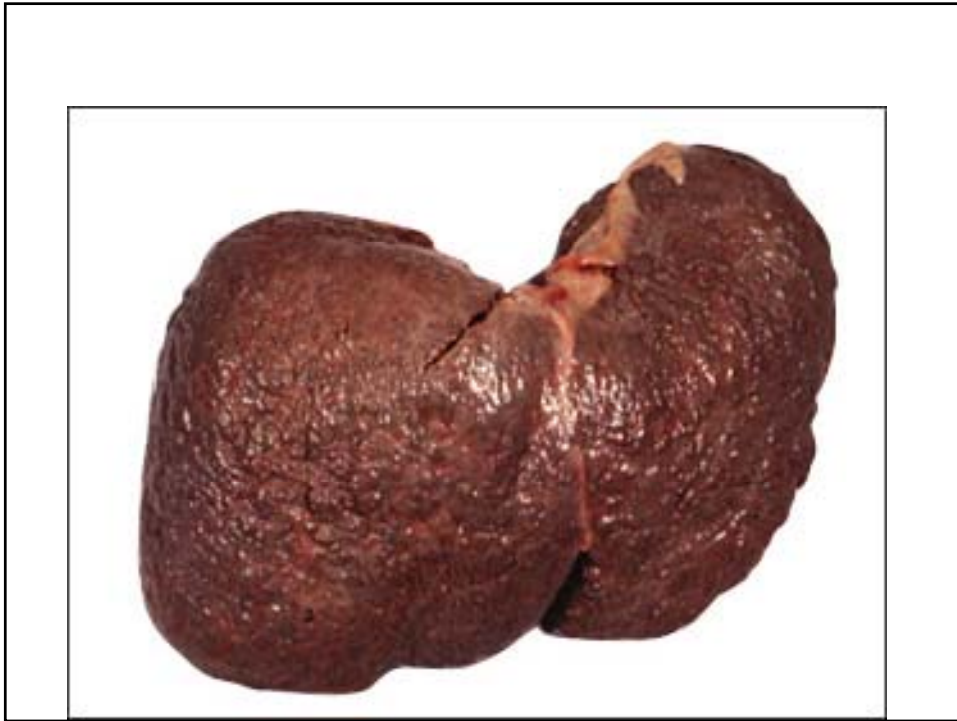
- Persistently having a desire to cut down on your alcohol intake or making unsuccessful attempts to do so.
- Spending a great deal of time obtaining, using, or recovering from alcohol use.
- Giving up important social, occupational or recreational activities.
- Continuing to use alcohol even though you know it's causing physical and psychological problems.

## Complications

- Alcohol depresses your central nervous system. In some people, the initial reaction may be stimulation. But as you continue to drink, you become sedated. Alcohol lowers your inhibitions and affects your thoughts, emotions and judgment.
- In sufficient amounts, alcohol impairs speech and muscle coordination.
- Too much alcohol can severely depress the vital centers of your brain. A heavy drinking binge may even cause a life-threatening coma.

## Complications

- severe health effects may include:
- **Liver disorders.** Drinking heavily can cause alcoholic hepatitis, an inflammation of the liver. Signs and symptoms may include loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and tenderness, fever, yellowing of the skin (jaundice), and sometimes confusion. After years of drinking, hepatitis may lead to cirrhosis, the irreversible and progressive destruction and scarring of liver tissue.
- **Gastrointestinal problems.** Alcohol can result in inflammation of the lining of the stomach (gastritis) and interfere with absorption of the B vitamins — particularly folic acid and thiamin — and other nutrients. Heavy drinking can also damage your pancreas, which produces the hormones that regulate your metabolism and the enzymes that help digest fats, proteins and carbohydrates.





- **Heart and arteries:**
- Excessive drinking can lead to high blood pressure and damage your heart muscle.
- **Diabetes complications.** Alcohol prevents the release of glucose from your liver and can increase the risk of low blood sugar (hypoglycemia).
- **Sexual function and menstruation.** Alcohol abuse can cause erectile dysfunction in men. In women, it can interrupt menstruation.
- **Bone loss.** Alcohol may interfere with the production of new bone. This can lead to thinning bones and an increased risk of fractures.

- **Neurological complications.** Excessive drinking can affect your nervous system, causing numbness of your hands and feet, disordered thinking and dementia.
- **Increased risk of cancer.** Chronic alcohol abuse has been linked to a higher risk of numerous cancers, including cancer of the mouth, pharynx (throat), esophagus, larynx, liver and colon, rectum, and breast.