

Alcohol

Alcohol is a drug, just as cocaine and marijuana are. For children and adults alike, alcohol is the number one drug of choice. An individual who begins drinking as a young teen is four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than someone who waits until adulthood to use alcohol. Almost 14 million Americans abuse alcohol or have developed alcoholism. The personal costs include broken dreams, potentials never reached, conflict, emotional grief, injury, illness, and death. The message is clear: The consequences of alcohol misuse are serious.

Alcohol occurs naturally in the environment in several forms. Ethyl alcohol is the chemical found in alcoholic beverages. Some distilled beverages, such as gin and vodka, may be as much as 45 percent alcohol, but these beverages are usually diluted as part of a mixed drink. One drink is equal to 1 ounce of 100-proof distilled spirits, four ounces of table wine, or twelve ounces of beer. These beverages all contain the same amount of alcohol which is one-half ounce of pure alcohol.

All alcohol is poison to some extent. Some forms can cause blindness if consumed in even small amounts. The ethyl alcohol in a beverage can be fatal if consumed in large amounts over a short period of time (binge drinking). But even in small amounts, such as those found in a can of beer, a glass of wine, or a shot of liquor, alcohol has a harmful effect. Some of these effects include: motor functioning and coordination are greatly impaired causing driving accidents, falls, and other injuries; brain function is harmed, leading to confusion, and memory loss; damage can occur in the liver (cirrhosis), pancreas, brain, stomach, and heart; other ailments such as anemia, pancreatitis, gastritis (stomach ailments), and neuritis (nerve damage) can result from alcohol use.

Women who drink alcohol during pregnancy may give birth to babies with alcohol-related neurological disorders, including fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). Children with FAS may have mental retardation, facial and limb irregularities, heart defects, behavior problems, shorter height, and lower birth weight. Some children may have fewer and more subtle symptoms of FAS.

Because alcohol is a depressant, when it is used in combination with other depressants, such as prescription drugs (sleeping pills or pain relievers), the effect can be fatal.

Alcohol is a depressant, but its immediate effect on many users may make them more agitated or aggressive. One reason is that alcohol lowers an individual's inhibitions, freeing them to behave in ways they normally wouldn't including ways that may be harmful, such as unprotected sex, violence, and drunk driving. Long-term abuse of alcohol can cause severe psychological problems, including extreme anxiety and alcohol dependency. Many long-term drinkers deny they have a problem. They also have great difficulty in setting long-term goals, are unable to handle responsibility, and struggle to accomplish necessary tasks. Continued use of alcohol may lead to alcohol dependence. All age groups-men, women, and young people can become alcoholics.