



ALCOHOL
and you

ALCOHOLISM GETTING THE FACTS

Most of us think we know something about alcoholism and drug addiction. After all, there are stories about addiction on TV and in the newspapers almost every day.

But what do we really know? How much is based on fact and how much is opinion? How often are myths and stereotypes recycled through the media and passed on as fact?

The purpose of this fact sheet is to dispel some of the myths and mis-perceptions and to present some simple facts.

→ What is Alcoholism

Put simply, alcoholism is an addiction to the sedative drug alcohol. Medical Associations and the World Health Organisation classified alcoholism, also known as Alcohol Dependence Syndrome, as a disease in the 1950's. While not everyone will call it a "disease" it does have symptoms, will have a path and can be treated.



→ So what is addiction?

The key to understanding addiction is compulsion: the loss of control regarding the use of any mood-altering drug such as alcohol.

Like any disease there are other symptoms:

Physical Dependence -

The onset of withdrawal symptoms such as nausea, sweating, shakiness etc when the consumption of alcohol is stopped or reduced after a period of heavy drinking.

Relief Drinking -

Use of alcohol to relieve symptoms of withdrawal. "The hair of the dog" or "the cure" is not a cure at all but a symptom of this disease.

What causes alcoholism?

If we only knew... We do know genetics play a part, but so does the psychological make up of the individual, and cultural influences. Ways of dealing with stress through alcohol can also be involved in a person becoming alcohol dependent.

Personality plays a part. Do you tend to be impulsive, compulsive, avoid problems, excessive?

Tolerance -

The need for increasing amounts of alcohol in order to get the desired effect.

Importance of alcohol and predictable patterns of drinking -

Drinking seems to take over, becoming very important and predictable.

As we are all individuals, there is no one picture of someone with alcoholism. Different people may have different patterns. The common theme, however, **is loss of control.**



There is one key question to ask yourself when thinking about alcohol and alcoholism. When I drink alcohol what happens? The loss of control is the cornerstone of addiction.

→ Stages of Alcoholism

Alcoholism is progressive with different stages.

Many people with Alcoholism go through these stages, but not necessarily in the same way.

Two important notes:

- The early stages can be difficult to recognise.
- Anyone can be successfully treated at any stage.



Early Stages are often difficult to spot:

- Tolerance increases (need more to get effect)
- Suffers blackouts (loss of memory)
- Preoccupied with alcohol ("Gulps" drinks)

Middle Stages

- Loses control of drinking
- (Can't predict when, how much)
- Feels remorse, depression, and guilt
- Loses job and friends
- Drinks in the morning

Final Stages

- Daily drinking
- Ethics and morals deteriorate

→ The Signs of Alcoholism

How can you tell if you or someone close to you may have a problem?
Answer these 4 questions honestly.

- | | | |
|----|---|--------|
| 1. | Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking? | Yes/no |
| 2. | Have people annoyed you by criticising your drinking? | Yes/no |
| 3. | Have you ever felt bad or guilty about your drinking? | Yes/no |
| 4. | Have you ever had a drink to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover (eye opener)? | Yes/no |

One **YES** suggests a possible problem.

YES to more than one it is highly likely that a problem exists.

Even if you answered **NO** to all of the above questions, if you are having drink-related problems, i.e. job, health, relationships, you should think of doing something about it.



→ What's in a Label

Sadly, many people have difficulty with the words alcoholism and alcoholic.

Why? More than likely that difficulty is associated with myths and stereotypes these labels tend to have.

Let's explore some.

Myth - Beer and wine drinkers can't be alcoholic.

Fact - The addiction is to the drug alcohol, not the package it comes in.

Myth - Alcoholism is a personal problem affecting just me.

Fact - Almost everyone with alcoholism affects at least 4 to 7 other people.

Myth - A person must drink daily to be alcoholic.

Fact - Only a minority of alcoholics are daily drinkers – drinking daily often comes at the later stages. It is not so much when a person drinks or how often, but when they do what happens?

Myth - I'm too young to become alcoholic.

Fact - Alcoholism can affect you young or old. We do know though, that when people begin drinking at a young age, the probability of becoming alcoholic rises sharply.

Myth - Alcoholics are down and outs.

Fact - Only 3 to 5% of all people suffering from alcoholism are "down and out". Many, many more are in homes, marriages and jobs. People from all walks of life become addicted to the drug ALCOHOL.

Myth - Good families don't have addiction problems.

Fact - Addiction is an equal opportunity condition. It cuts across all social classes race and genders. Once someone begins to use a mood-altering drug including alcohol, excessively regardless of family background, can they accurately predict if they will or won't become addicted?

Myth - Alcoholism or other drug addiction is a sign of moral weakness and weak will.

Fact - Will power has little to do with it. Alcoholism, like all addiction to mood altering drugs is routed in brain chemistry that creates obsessive thinking and compulsion to use.

As a result of this and other myths, people often believe that to seek help is to admit some type of shameful defect. This could not be further from the truth. Taking steps to deal with any issue takes determination and can have an enormous payoff – a chance for a healthier, more rewarding life.



→ Hopefully Reading This Fact Sheet Prompted Some Questions

Is alcoholism a disease?

In Shimna House the inpatient unit in Downpatrick, we believe it is. It is a progressive bio – (body) psycho (mind) – social disease with clear symptoms and stages.

Can alcoholism be cured?

No – although it can be treated! We also know treatment works! Research shows treatment for alcohol and other drug problems can be effective.

If I have trouble with my drinking can't I just cut down?

That depends – if you suffer from alcoholism, the answer is probably NO. Studies show that for people with alcoholism cutting out (abstinence) is nearly always necessary for successful recovery. If you do not have alcoholism, cutting down is very hard work – trying to control your intake of a highly addictive sedative drug.

I'm not drinking any more than my friends are. How heavily then are your friends drinking?

Binge drinking in Northern Ireland is a serious concern. Excessive drinking does put a serious strain on many parts of the body, can cause health, relationship and social problems, and can lead to dependency.

Is there hope?

Yes! Many people have achieved successful change and recovery using help from support groups such as AA, Smart Recovery, Life Ring, Health Professionals, or some other means. Acknowledging alcohol is a problem for you is the first step.

→ Getting support

What about my family?

It is important to say there is support for you in your own right.

Each of the five Health Trust areas has a community based service (step 2) that provides individual family support.

For a directory of services for family members and how to contact them see.

www.drugsandalcoholni.info

For young people Steps to Cope is an intervention for 11-18 year olds

www.stepstocope.co.uk

T: 0800 2545 123

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If you are worried about your drinking see your GP or use the alcohol and drug services in your area which can be found at:

www.drugsandalcoholni.info

or see the Alcohol and You website that has self-help and a range of information and resources.

www.alcoholandyouni.com

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