

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
Elliott B. Sewell, MAE, LPCC, NCC

Alcoholism Part II



Times are very stressful and the future is looking more and more certain. In these situations, alcohol addiction and abuse, always a problem, increases, often dramatically. That is why I have written a three-part series on alcoholism. In part I, I defined alcoholism, discussed the causes, and talked about who becomes an alcoholic. In part II, this current article I shall discuss the seriousness of alcoholism and how alcoholism is diagnosed. In part III, I shall tell you about the treatment for alcohol withdrawal and the long-term treatments for alcoholism, and tell you the reasons why people with alcoholism relapse.

As of this writing, about 1000 Americans have died from Swine Flu this year, while we can expect another 100,000 deaths this year due, at least in part, due to drinking. Not only does it end many lives prematurely, but alcoholism lowers life expectancy by 10 to 12 years. (It must be pointed out that moderate drinkers – about one drink per day – live longer than those who abstain completely; more than that may lead to an earlier demise. Alcohol overdose can be fatal and often occurs among adolescents who try to show off but don't know their limits.

It is known that less than two drinks can impair driving skills, which is why alcohol is a factor in more than half of automobile deaths. One study of emergency rooms showed that just one drink doubled the risk of injury; four drinks increased the risks eleven times. Almost half of injury patients tested positive for alcohol, and more than a third were actually intoxicated. One out of four who commit suicide is an alcoholic. Two-thirds of murders involve alcohol.

Alcohol abuse leads to domestic violence, particularly against women and children. Those children of alcoholics do worse in school, and suffer more from low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and stress. This is probably because their family life is full of conflict, less stable; family members are less expressive and less independent. The problems faced by four out of ten children in alcoholic households carry over into adulthood, leading to higher divorce rates and psychiatric symptoms, which may last a lifetime. Only physical and sexual abuse does more psychological harm to children.

Chronic alcohol use can lead to many medical problems, except for light drinking, as we previously defined it. Even moderate drinking can raise blood pressure, set off irregular heartbeats, and increase the risk for coronary artery disease even more than smoking cigarettes. Binge drinkers had two and one-half times the risk for cardiac emergency, because it damages the heart muscle and increases blood pressure dramatically.

Alcohol does not cause cancer; however it increases the effect of other substances such as tobacco smoke, where it dramatically increases the risk for many cancers among smokers, including the following cancers: pancreatic, gastric, colorectal, urinary tract, brain, lung, liver, mouth, laryngeal, throat, esophageal, lymphoma and leukemia. Women who have just one drink a day can increase their chance of getting breast cancer by 30%. Alcoholics who smoke make their smoking related health issue far more serious.

The liver may be the most vulnerable organ. Up to one-third of heavy drinkers wind up with alcoholic hepatitis, and up to 20% develop cirrhosis. Their risk for hepatitis B and C also increases dramatically.

Alcohol can lead to diarrhea, hemorrhoids, and in conjunction with aspirin or ibuprofen – pancreatic infections and ulcers. It also damages the immune system and thus increases infections, especially in the lungs, leading to pneumonia.

Some studies show that alcohol does not impair the ability to think and reason, habitual use can destroy the gray matter of the brain and leave the drinker confused and depressed, and in the long run can lead to psychosis. If the consumption is not too severe, all mental functions can return to normal if the patient stops drinking altogether.

Severe alcoholics are prone to osteoporosis, muscle swelling and pain, skin sores, and itching. Women are particularly prone to muscle damage of the heart. Since it increases the levels of the female hormone estrogen and reduces the level of the male hormone testosterone, drinking can reduce male impotence. For diabetics, alcohol can cause hypoglycemia, a dangerous fall in blood sugar level.

Though a pint of whiskey has about half the calories needed daily, these calories have no nutritional value and prevents the absorption of protein and vitamins, eventually leading to loss of balance and memory, confusion, anemia, permanent brain damage, and ultimately can prove fatal.

A study of patients in intensive care units show an increased risk of Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS) which can lead to lung failure and death. Alcohol alters the effects of many medications, including most psychiatric drugs, diabetes medicines, and anti-seizure medications. Combined with aspirin, naproxen or ibuprofen, alcohol increases the risk for gastrointestinal bleeding.

As we age, it takes fewer drinks to make us intoxicated. Our organs are more vulnerable to damage, and over half of the most-prescribed drugs for the elderly have an adverse reaction in the body in conjunction with alcohol consumption.

Drinking during pregnancy is deadly and may lead to increased risk for miscarriage and low birth weight. Larger amounts can lead to fetal alcohol syndrome, resulting in mental and physical retardation, and also to infant leukemia.

Physicians don't always make the initial diagnosis of alcoholism, and actually detect the symptoms less than half of the time because they don't screen for the symptoms or don't recognize them at the time of examination. (It should be understood that physicians DO recognize the symptoms in nearly half of alcoholics). It is even more difficult in the elderly, who show similar symptoms due to the aging process. Many alcoholics come in for vague problems, such as a general weakness, joint pains or intestinal problems without a readily understood cause. In these cases, the physician could follow up with an alcohol screening. Instead, they are often diagnosed as depressed and are given anti-depression or anti-anxiety drugs, which interact adversely with the alcohol, and do not help the condition. When the physician does recognize alcoholism, they are often reluctant to confront the patient about the problem.

The screening tests are basically standardized questionnaires, answered in writing or administered verbally by the physician. The most common are the CAGE test, and the SAAST, which work best for white males. More effectively are the AUDIT test, the ADS test, and the MAST test.

Tests can be done in the laboratory. A simple blood alcohol level test will only measure the degree of alcohol currently in the blood. More effective tests measure the size of red blood cells, which increase over time with alcohol use (mean corpuscular volume or MCV blood test). Another test for carbohydrate-deficient transferrin may also indicate heavy use of alcohol. Other tests for liver damage and low testosterone can be indicators as well.

When a positive diagnosis is made, a treatment should be sought. If a patient is not yet addicted, brief interventions by a doctor, nurse, or by a counselor and be effective in reducing use, though the method of group treatment or even casual, non-threatening meetings with family and friends can be helpful. Some larger businesses are sympathetic and will provide help. Professional help, whether individual or group, is always the most effective.

Alcoholism is a disease and can be treated. The symptoms are not because the alcoholic is a morally deficient person, but because they have developed physical and mental addictions. They crave alcohol, they are afraid of withdrawal, they fear the treatment process. Without seeking help, if they cannot stop themselves (and most can't), they will continue with their disease and its path of disintegration. Many are cured and there is always great hope for those that take action. The best time, of course, is now.

Part III coming soon.