

Greenwich Hospital

PATIENT INFORMATION SHEET FOR ALCOHOLISM

What is Alcoholism

Alcoholism is a disorder characterized by repeated drinking of alcoholic beverages to the extent that it interferes with physical health, emotional health and social functioning. Unlike the stereotype image of the alcoholic, most "alcoholics" have families, friends, and a job. Alcoholism constitutes the third leading cause of disability or death in America.

About one in ten persons who drink alcohol will become alcoholic or chemically addicted. Some of the long-term effects of alcohol on the body are listed below:

- Accidents
- Birth Defects
- Bleeding/cancer of the esophagus
- Brain damage
- Delirium Tremens (DTs)
- Heart problems
- Impotency
- Liver failure
- Mood disorders
- Pancreatitis
- Ulcers

How is Alcoholism Treated?

Alcoholism is treated by abstinence. The process of eliminating alcohol from the body is called detoxification. Detoxification is a process that requires medical management and should be done under the supervision of a physician.

What is Addiction?

Addiction is a condition in which a person develops a dependence on any mood-altering substance. Mood altering drugs (such as alcohol) alter the chemistry of the brain and change the way a person thinks, feels and behaves. There is evidence that chemical addiction is hereditary. The body of an addicted person reacts to mood-altering chemicals in a different way than the body of a non-addicted person.

How Does the Addiction Process Progress?

Addiction develops in a predictable series of phases:

- Early stage: characterized by increasing tolerance (the ability to drink more) and dependence
- Middle stage: marked by progressive lack of control. There is a loss of predictability as to how much and when one drinks.
- Chronic stage: Characterized by physical, psychological, behavioral, social and spiritual deterioration. Overall the quality of life is poor.

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What is Denial?

Denial of addiction is common in all stages:

- Early stage: lack of identifiable problems make denial possible
- Middle stage: Pain and problems are not associated with addiction
- Chronic stage: Impaired thinking and judgement distort reality

In all stages, denial blocks motivation for recovery by masking reality.

How Do I Know if I Need Treatment?

Often treatment is avoided because denial does not allow a dependent drinker to acknowledge that drinking is a problem. Ask someone who loves and cares for you about the impact of your use on him or her. This kind of questioning takes commitment and courage, but could potentially change your life.

How Do I Begin to Recover?

Alcoholic's Anonymous (AA) is an essential part of the recovery process. It provides support from other people in recovery. AA utilizes action steps (called "The Twelve Steps") to guide the recovering process. In addition, specialized help is sometimes needed. Health problems require the assistance of a medical doctor who understands addiction. Financial problems or legal problems may require the assistance of an attorney or financial advisor. Marriage and/or sexual problems may require counseling. Anxiety and Mood disorders may require the assistance of a psychiatrist or psychologist. Addictions may require inpatient treatment. AL-ANON and ALA-Teen are often helpful for family members who need help with constructively dealing with their feelings about an addicted family member.

What Can I do to Promote Recovery?

Healthful living supports recovery. Good nutrition helps rebuild and heal the body. Avoid concentrated sweets, caffeine, and nicotine. Relaxation exercises and physical exercise help promote health and reduce stress. Fun and play are part of total well being. Recovery requires commitment on the part of the user and the family. Family support facilitates the recovery process and promotes abstinence.

For more information, call The Recovery Program at Greenwich Hospital: (203) 863-HOPE or your primary care physician.

For more Patient Education Fact Sheets, see the Greenwich Hospital web site at www.greenhosp.org and click on Patient Services, then Patient Education.