

*Danbury Hospital Patient Education Sheet***What is Alcoholism?****Is drinking alcohol hazardous to your health?**

If you are like many Americans, you drink alcohol (beer, wine, liquor) at least occasionally. For most adults, some alcohol use is not harmful. Many people believe that moderate drinking is probably safe. Alcohol has been shown to be heart protective when used in moderation. Moderate drinking is considered to be one drink a day for women or anyone over 65, and two drinks a day for men under 65.

However, using alcohol may put your health at serious risk. We now know that even low or moderate alcohol consumption increases the risk of cancer, such as breast cancer in women and cancer of the mouth, pharynx, esophagus, larynx, colorectal, and liver in both sexes.

When stopped abruptly, people may have withdrawal symptoms from alcohol. This often occurs with regular and/or daily use, no matter how small the amount. It can especially be a problem when undergoing routine medical procedures or during an acute medical or surgical hospitalization. It is important to let your physician know during any hospitalization or out-patient procedure, the frequency and amount of alcohol you routinely drink.

Some people should not drink at all, including alcoholics, children, pregnant women, people on certain medicines, including over-the-counter medicines, and/or with certain medical conditions. If you have questions about whether it is safe for you to drink, speak with your healthcare provider.

Anything more than moderate drinking can be very risky. Teens often think that occasional binge drinking is okay. Binge

drinking is drinking five or more drinks at one time. Binge drinking can damage your health and increase your risk for accidents, injuries and assault. Heavy drinking can cause damage to the brain, liver and other organs. It increases the risk of death from car crashes, other injuries such as falls, the risk of homicide and suicide, and it causes birth defects.

What is Alcoholism?

Alcoholism is a disease with four main features:

- *Craving* - a strong need to drink
- *Loss of control* - not being able to stop drinking once you've begun
- *Physical dependence* – withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating or shakiness after stopping drinking
- *Tolerance* - the need to drink greater amounts of alcohol in order to get “high”

Alcoholism carries many serious dangers. Alcohol dependence, also called alcoholism, is a public health issue since it leads to a decline in brain and physical functioning, over time and has many complications for individuals and their families.

Alcohol dependence can be caused by genes and / or can be habit forming. Unfortunately, drinking regularly especially, drinking to get “high” causes individuals to drink higher and higher amounts to get that “buzz” and/or to try other illicit drugs to experience an even increased “high.”

Years of heavy drinking can lead to liver disease, heart disease, cancer and pancreatitis. It can also cause problems at home, at work and with friends. People of all ages can die as a result of drinking, whether it be death by motor vehicle accident while intoxicated, or dying from cardiac or liver failure.

While most adults who drink alcoholic beverages (beer, wine, or liquor) consume safe and healthy amounts, many others, increase their risk for injury, illness or future alcohol problems. For 1 in 13 American adults, alcohol abuse or alcohol dependence (alcoholism) causes substantial harm to their health and disruption in their lives. If you consume alcoholic beverages, it's important to know whether your drinking patterns are safe, risky or harmful.

Is alcohol use fun or cool?

Drinking alcohol is dangerous for children, teens and sometimes for adults, too. Alcohol is a drug, and it is the drug most abused by teens. Many children have their first drink at an early age, as young as 10 or 11 or even younger. It is easy for them to get the wrong message about alcohol. They might see their parents drink, or watch TV commercials that make drinking look like a lot of fun.

Alcohol is actually a depressant. This means that it is a drug that slows down or depresses the brain. Like many drugs, alcohol changes a person's ability to think, speak, and see things as they really are. A person might lose his or her balance and have trouble walking properly. The person might feel relaxed and happy and later start crying or get in an argument. For young people who drink too much, school work and athletics usually suffer as a consequence, and they may also lose treasured friendships.

What Happens When People Drink?

When people drink too much, they might do or say things they do not mean. They might hurt themselves or other people, especially if they drive a car. Someone who drinks too much also might throw up and get stomach contents in their lung, causing pneumonia. Drinking too much alcohol at any one time, can lead to alcohol poisoning which can kill a

person. More often people just wake up the next day feeling awful, called a hangover.

Over time, someone who abuses alcohol can do serious damage to his or her body. The liver, which removes poisons from the blood, is especially at risk. Because alcohol can cause such problems, the citizens and government leaders in this country have decided that children should not be allowed to buy or use alcohol. By setting the drinking age at 21, they hope older people will be able to make good decisions about alcohol.

Could I have a problem with drinking?

If you consume alcoholic beverages, it is important to know whether your drinking patterns are safe, risky or harmful.

If you answer yes to one of the following statements you do have a drinking problem and you may want to seek help NOW!

1. Have you ever thought about cutting down your drinking?
2. Have you ever been annoyed by criticism about your drinking from family or friends or ever been told that you ought to cut down?
3. Have you ever had guilty feelings about your drinking?
4. Have you ever needed a drink to start your day, usually referred to as needing an eye opener?

Should anyone want to stop drinking, there are many helpful treatments such as medication, the 12 step process, individual therapy and Alcoholics Anonymous.

Source:
National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Retrieved 3/2009 from www.niaaa.nih.gov
American Society of Addiction Medicine. Retrieved 3.2009 from www.asam.org
Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration. Retrieved 3/2009 from www.samhsa.gov

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