

Alcohol Fact Sheet



A leader in providing behavioral health services

What You Should Know About Alcohol Problems

Alcohol use is legal for persons age 21 and older, and the majority of people who drink do so without incident.

Eighty-two percent of people age 12 and older have used alcohol at least once in their lifetime.

However, there is a continuum of problems associated with alcohol consumption. Alcohol is the most widely used intoxicating substance in the United States.

Nearly half of all Americans age 12 and older, over 109 million people, have used alcohol in the past month.



How Do We Define “Alcohol Problem”?

The term alcohol problem refers to any problem related to alcohol use that may require some type of intervention or treatment.

Alcohol problems vary in duration and severity, and can be identified as either acute, intermittent, or chronic.

Even people who drink occasionally may consume alcohol at levels that can pose a serious risk for alcohol-

related problems. Such risky drinkers typically experience mild or moderate intermittent alcohol problems.

More severe chronic problems may be experienced by persons clinically diagnosed with alcohol abuse or alcohol dependence. Some characteristics that may affect a person’s development of alcohol problems include age, cultural background, and mental or physical health, including disabilities.

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Risky Drinking

A significant proportion of problems related to alcohol use occur in persons who are not necessarily alcohol dependent but who engage in risky drinking.

Risky drinking is defined as consuming alcohol in a way that may pose a risk of physical or emotional harm to the drinker or others but has not yet produced effects resulting in a diagnosis of alcohol dependence. **Risky drinking includes heavy or excessive drinking, such as binge drinking, which**

is drinking four or more drinks on a single occasion. It also includes drinking in situations that increase the risk of harm.

Drinking before or while driving, while pregnant, or while taking certain prescription medications are examples of this type of drinking.

Identifying risky drinking behavior may lead to the early detection and prevention of the more serious problems of alcohol abuse and dependence.

Alcohol Abuse

A person who frequently engages in risky drinking may have a more severe alcohol problem-called alcohol abuse. **Alcohol abuse is a recognized medical condition defined as the regular use of alcohol despite recurrent negative consequences.**

A diagnosis of alcohol abuse is made when someone exhibits one or more of the following within a 12-month period:

- Recurrent alcohol use resulting in a failure to fulfill obligations at work, school, or home.

- Recurrent alcohol use in situations in which it is physically hazardous (e.g., driving an automobile when impaired).
- Recurrent alcohol-related legal problems.
- Continued alcohol use despite having persistent or recurrent social or interpersonal problems caused or exacerbated by alcohol use.

Alcohol Dependence

The most severe problem is alcohol dependence, also referred to as alcoholism or alcohol addiction.

In 2003, there were an estimated 6.1 million people age 12 and older who were dependent on alcohol. Alcohol dependence is a chronic, often fatal, disease with definable symptoms.

An individual has become alcohol dependent when he or she experiences three or more of the following in a 12-month period:

- Tolerance: the need for increasing amounts of alcohol to reach intoxication.
- Withdrawal: the occurrence of physical symptoms when heavy alcohol use is reduced or stopped. Its symptoms may include tremors, sweating, a high pulse rate, nausea, vomiting or seizures.

- Drinking larger amounts of alcohol or drinking over a longer period than was intended.
- Persistent, unsuccessful efforts to cut down on or control alcohol use.
- Spending a great deal of time obtaining, using, or recovering from the effects of alcohol use.
- Giving up or reducing social, occupational, or recreational activities because of alcohol use.
- Using despite persistent or recurring physical or psychological problems that were caused by alcohol use.

Alcohol dependence is a persistent condition. Approximately two-thirds of persons who are diagnosed as alcohol dependent will still be dependent in 5 years without treatment.

Contributing Factors to Alcohol Dependence

Alcohol dependence is influenced by both genetic and environmental factors. Persons with a family history of dependence have a higher chance of lifetime dependence than those without such a history. In addition, researchers have now identified genes that influence people's susceptibility to alcohol dependence. However, hereditary influences alone do not predict a future of alcohol dependence.

Environmental factors also play a significant role. Although the child of a parent who is dependent on alcohol may be genetically predisposed to alcohol dependence, many effectively avoid it through education,

self-monitoring, and social support. Conversely, neurochemical changes in the brain caused by repeated abuse of substances such as alcohol can lead to neurological substance dependence, even if the individual has no genetic vulnerability to addiction disorders.

Preventing drinking among youth is important, not only because drinking alcohol is illegal for persons younger than age 21, but also because postponing the onset of alcohol use decreases the likelihood of developing dependence later in life. About 40 percent of those who start drinking at age 15 or younger develop alcohol dependence at some point. (Please see Figure 1).

Contributing Factors to Alcohol Dependence (cont.)

Several factors may help discourage or at least postpone adolescent alcohol use:

- Parental support, communication, and monitoring are significantly related to whether adolescents drink, the amount they drink, and the frequency of their drinking.

- Adolescents' drinking behavior is also related to their friends' acceptance or rejection of drinking and whether their friends drink.

Percentage of Adults Diagnosed with Lifetime Alcohol Dependence

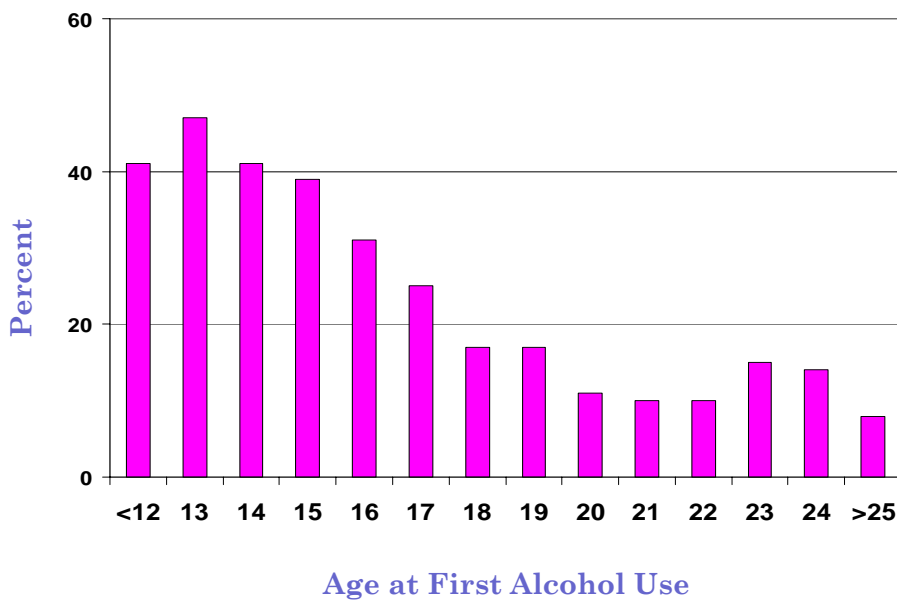


Figure #1

Consequences of Alcohol Use

Identifying and eliminating problem drinking behaviors are important for many reasons. Problem alcohol use of any degree of severity disrupts family and social relationships and can lead to psychological problems, violence and aggression, and legal problems. Problem alcohol use is also linked to an increased risk of injuries, including those resulting from automobile crashes, falls, and fires.

Problem drinking may also contribute to unsafe sex practices leading to an increased incidence of HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Finally, higher levels of alcohol consumption are associated with a greater risk of negative health effects, in-

cluding a weakened immune system, tuberculosis, coronary heart disease, stroke, liver cirrhosis, and cancer.

The most recent calculation of the overall economic costs of alcohol problems was estimated by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism at more than \$194 billion in 1999. (Please see Figure 2).

More than 70 percent of these costs were attributed to productivity losses (\$134.2 billion) caused by impaired workplace and household productivity related to alcohol use, work time lost by incarcerated offenders and victims of alcohol-related crime, and premature death.

Estimated Economic Costs of Alcohol Abuse

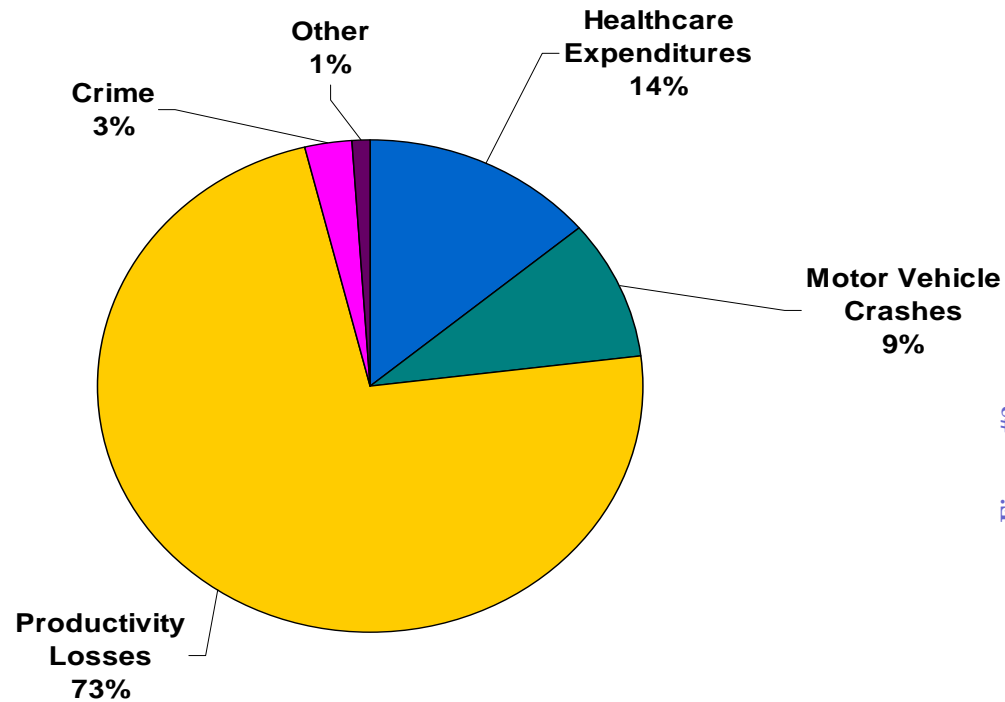


Figure #2

Detection and Treatment of Alcohol Use Problems

Prevention of and early intervention in alcohol problems are important to reduce their consequences and related social and economic costs. **Alcohol screening identifies both risky drinkers and drinkers who are experiencing symptoms of alcohol abuse or dependence.**

Screening tools range from brief self-administered questionnaires to lengthy clinician-administered interviews. Screening for co-occurring mental disorders is also essential for planning an effective intervention.

Once an alcohol problem has been identified, it must be treated appropriately. Individuals experience different types of alcohol problems with each person having different characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses.

These issues must be considered when assessing what treatment methods are most appropriate. A comprehensive and effective assessment must provide a detailed description of the kind of alcohol problem experienced by a particular individual.



In general, these persons identified as risky drinkers experience mild or moderate alcohol problems and usually benefit most from brief interventions. These sessions incorporate counseling and education sessions that provide practical advice and build skills.

Brief interventions are designed to reduce alcohol use, thus minimizing the risk of developing further alcohol-related problems. **Research has shown that brief interventions are effective in reducing drinking and related problems.**

Some people may benefit more from intensive treatment approaches, which can include psychological, pharmacological, social, and medical services.

The Path to Healing

Reaping the benefits of treatment begins by recognizing the signs of alcohol addiction. This step is best facilitated by having a comprehensive assessment by a qualified healthcare professional. Although alcohol addiction can be diagnosed by primary care physicians, most often the physician will refer the patient to a psychiatrist, psychologist, counselors, or other professionals specializing in addictions.

Treatment is a partnership between the patient and the healthcare provider. It is important that informed consumers understand their treatment options and discuss all concerns with a treatment provider as they arise.

A key element of Rimrock's treatment is the active involvement of patients in the management of their own illness.

Empowerment is developed through the use of patient education, skills training and a strong emphasis on encouraging the individual patient to accept responsibility in managing their own condition. Along with the empowerment of our patients, is the emphasis on a treatment regimen which includes comprehensive clinical assessments and individualized patient plans.

Another important part of Rimrock's program is the emphasis we place on the integration of a broad spectrum of community, health and human services



for the benefit of the patient. This includes addressing patient's physical, psychological, social and economic needs, which improves the likelihood of a successful treatment experience.

Healthcare services should be readily available to those persons needing treatment for addictions, since taking advantage of opportunities when they are

ready for treatment is often crucial. Many times, patients can easily be lost in red tape if treatment is not immediately available or is not readily accessible.

Counseling (individual and/or group) and other behavioral therapies are critical components of effective treatment for an addiction. In therapy, pa-

tients address issues of motivation, build skills to resist drug use, replace drug-using activities with constructive and rewarding non-drug-using activities, and improve problem-solving abilities. Behavioral therapy also facilitates interpersonal relationships and the individual's ability to function in the family and community.

Successful recovery principles in addiction treatment are characterized by the integration of personal, family, professional and other community resources toward the goal of enhancing the duration and quality of life of those we serve.

For further information about treatment for Alcoholism, please call Barbara Hansen, Rimrock Foundation Admissions Supervisor at 1-800-227-3953 or 1-406-248-3175.

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