

Alcohol Fact Sheet

Treating Alcoholism: The Illness

For many people, the facts about alcoholism are not clear. What is alcoholism, exactly? When should a person seek help for a problem related to their drinking? This Fact Sheet will help explain alcoholism and its symptoms, as well as when and where to seek help.

What is Alcoholism?

Alcoholism is defined as a chronic, progressive and relapsing disease which can be characterized by one or more of the following elements:

- **Craving:** A strong need, or compulsion, to drink.
- **Loss of Control:** The frequent inability to stop drinking once an episode has begun.
- **Physical Dependence:** The occurrence of withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, shakiness, and anxiety, when alcohol use is stopped after a period of drinking. These symptoms are usually relieved temporarily by drinking more alcohol.
- **Tolerance:** The need for increasing amounts of alcohol in order to get “high.”

Alcoholism has little to do with what kind of alcohol one drinks, how long one has been drinking, or even how much alcohol one consumes. **But it has a great deal to do with a per-**

son’s uncontrollable need for alcohol. This description of a person’s alcoholic behavior helps us understand why they can’t just “use a little willpower” to stop drinking.

Alcoholics are in the grip of a powerful craving for alcohol, a need that can feel as strong as the need for food or water. While some people are able to recover without professional help, the majority of suffering alcoholics need outside assistance to recover from this illness. With support and treatment, many individuals are able to stop drinking and rebuild their lives.

Why can some individuals use alcohol without problems, while others are utterly unable to control their drinking?

Recent research has demonstrated that for many people, this vulnerability to alcoholism is inherited. Other equally important factors include a person’s environment, peer influences and the availability of alcohol.



Inside this issue:

What is Alcoholism?	1
Medical Consequences	2
Screening & Assessments	2
A Game Called Denial	2
Treating the Alcoholic	3
The Path to Healing	4
Our Treatment Program	4

A substantial number of people have serious trouble with their drinking. Currently, an estimated 20 million Americans, or 1 in every 13 adults, are alcoholic. Several million more

adults and adolescents engage in risky problem drinking that could lead to serious alcohol problems. In addition, approximately 53 percent of men and women in the

United States report that one or more of their close friends or a relative may have a drinking problem.

Medical Consequences

The physical consequences of alcohol misuse are serious—in many cases, life-threatening. Heavy drinking can increase the risk for certain cancers, especially those of the liver, esophagus and throat. It can cause liver cirrhosis, immune system problems, brain damage, and harm to the fetus during pregnancy.



In addition, drinking increases the risk of death from automobile crashes, recreational accidents, on-the-job accidents, homicide and suicide. In purely economic terms, alcohol-related problems cost society over \$170 billion per year. In human terms, the costs are incalculable.

Screening and Assessments

To effectively treat alcoholism, the problem must first be properly identified. Healthcare providers, physicians, professional counselors and others working in the addiction counseling field using standardized testing materials can successfully screen and refer patients for in-depth clinical assessments when indicated. Screening should focus on the severity and consumption patterns of an individual's substance use.

Screening determines whether there is a need for a comprehensive assessment; it does not establish definitive information about diagnoses or possible treatment needs.

A comprehensive assessment

Screening usually takes no longer than 30 minutes to complete.

normally follows a positive screening for a substance use disorder and may lead to longer-term intervention efforts. The comprehensive assessment process identifies the presence of any addiction problems as well as illuminating other health-related issues. **Effective professional assessments should include:**

1. Documenting the presence, nature, and complexity of substance use reported during a screening,

including whether the person meets medical diagnostic criteria for abuse or dependence.

2. Identifying and detailing related information flagged in the screening process, including ingestion history, medical status, psychological status, social functioning and family relations.
3. Development of a comprehensive written report that identifies and accurately diagnoses the severity of use along with possible recommendations for treatment.

Alcoholism—A Game Called Denial

Persons suffering from alcoholism can hide the illness from others, or even from themselves, for a long time.

The alcoholic tends to spend a lot of time thinking about drinking and planning where and when he or she is going to get the next drink. Bottles may be hidden at home, in the car, or

at work for quick pick-me-ups. Sometimes drinking starts without consciously planning it, and then there may not be an awareness of how much alcohol was consumed.

Often they will deny quite forcefully that there has been any drinking at all. Other familiar indications of alcoholism include gulp-

ing drinks, drinking alone, drinking in the morning, or drinking before facing stressful situations that bring on feelings of nervousness and unhappiness. The alcoholic may have blackouts, not remembering what happened while they were drinking.

Treating the Alcoholic

With treatment, people develop new core beliefs and conclusions about themselves. They can truly believe, perhaps for the first time, that they are worthwhile human beings who deserve respect, acceptance and love. They can believe they are able to change and grow, and then discover real joy in changing and growing. They can believe their needs will be met through normal human relationships, and they can go on to develop and sustain healthy relationships.

Treatment is a unique experience, offering a process of self-discovery where patients can find healthy new ways of coping with and enjoying life.

- **Managing Withdrawal**

Managing acute intoxication and withdrawal is vital in helping the alcoholic. Patients must recover from acute intoxication as a first step towards changing their behavior.

Encouragement and support from



our empathetic, licensed professional staff are essential elements in seeing patients through this initial treatment phase.

Medical treatment for other health problems is usually started during the same period when withdrawal is being handled. Once the patient receives special care for their physical ailments, stops using alcohol, and starts eating properly, the progress of most alcohol-related illnesses can be halted. In many cases, portions of the body that have been seriously injured immediately begin the process of healing.

- **Counseling**

For most patients, lasting benefit is best achieved from therapy that attempts to get at the factors underlying or associated with their alcoholism. There are many components to inpatient treatment, such as individual or group psychotherapy, family therapy and individual counseling.

Counseling offered by specially trained and licensed addiction counselors is one of the most frequently used forms of treatment, and it has been found to be very effective. Our counselors, some of whom have had first-hand experience with the illness, put their knowledge and understanding to good use in helping addicted people rebuild their lives.

- **What If The Person Won't Go For Treatment?**

Some victims of alcoholism continue to deny their illness or to reject offers of help for a very long time. In such cases, it is important to realize that entering treatment is not always a decision that depends only on the attitude of the addicted person.

Concerned family members, friends, and work associates should learn enough about the illness to exert compassionate yet firm pressure in making treatment an acceptable, practical and hopeful solution to this destructive illness.

- **Is Waiting Necessary?**

For too long, many people have falsely believed that an alcoholic has to hit "rock bottom" before they can either accept or benefit from treatment. **Today we know that many alcoholics are relieved when they understand their alcoholism is a treatable illness.** But the sooner a person gets help, the better their chances are for a successful recovery.

Alcohol addiction represents a challenge to treatment professionals. Alcoholics are prone to relapse and are often the most difficult patients to treat effectively because of their many problems. These patients require a comprehensive treatment approach that recognizes their special needs and provides integrated care for their multiple disorders.

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 evaluation done by an addictions healthcare professional. Although alcohol addiction can be diagnosed by primary care physicians, most often the physician will refer the patient to a psychiatrist, psychologist or clinical

counselor 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 fully discuss all their concerns with a treatment provider as they arise.



Our Treatment Program

A key element of Rimrock's treatment program 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, we offer a treatment regimen which includes comprehensive clinical assessments, individualized treatment plans and services for the whole family.

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



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.

Rimrock Foundation

1231 North 29th Street
Billings, Montana 59101

Phone: 406-248-3175
Fax: 406-248-3821
Email: comm@rimrock.org

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.



Disclaimer: This Fact Sheet is designed for educational purposes only. The information contained herein is not intended to substitute for informed medical advice or training. This information should not be used to diagnose or treat a health problem without consulting a qualified healthcare provider.