

I need a drink. Do you? How much is too much?



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I need a drink! Many people say this casually at the end of a stressful day even though they may not necessarily follow through and get a drink. For others who may have an underlying problem of addiction to alcohol even though they may not be aware of it, such a statement is problematic. A person with addiction constantly finds reasons to drink -- drinking to celebrate, to forget, to deal with a stressful situation and usual frustrations of daily life, to deal with a loss, and so on.



There is no end to rationalizing and justifying the next drink. Such a person is often oblivious to the devastating effects of excessive drinking. Sometimes, people drink to overcome anxiety, to numb the emotional pain from stress and depression and to cope with other underlying problems.

Alcoholism is a growing problem in the South Asian community. There is little understanding of the difference between social drinking and alcoholism. Of course, not all drinking is bad, and there is a place and time for social drinking. But it is not for everyone. An alcoholic lacks control over drinking and is unable to stop after the first drink.

The easy availability of alcohol legally and the social acceptance of drinking causes further difficulties for problem drinkers. In public or in a social situation, a problem drinker may pass off as a social drinker up to a point. It is often customary to have an open bar in events involving South Asians. A person not drinking is almost considered an anomaly and is coaxed into drinking. This may be rooted in the perception of having a drink as a sign of success, elitism, or just being cool.

First-generation South Asians in the US, especially women, are at an increased risk of binge drinking. In colleges, excessive drinking is seen as a sign of machismo. Unfortunately, it results in many deaths at colleges and universities across the country every year. One of the many

examples is that of Vaibhev Loomba, a 20-year-old South Asian mathematics major from the University of California–Davis campus. In 2014, he was found dead after a fraternity party near the University of California–Berkeley campus. The coroner’s office report indicated that he had died of acute alcohol poisoning.

There are many myths about drinking in our society, especially in the South Asian community. People rationalize that alcohol does not cause the kind of problems as drugs, and they consider it safe and acceptable. They fail to realize that alcohol causes significant problems with our health and is a common cause of injuries and motor vehicle accidents. Alcohol can cause serious problems in the liver, nerves, brain, eyes, heart and practically every other organ. It can cause depression and worsen an existing depression. Chronic alcohol use can result in memory problems and dementia. One cannot begin to measure the devastation it causes in the careers, families and lives of those who do not know when to quit.

Alcohol has a major disinhibiting effect on our brains. In other words, it paralyses the normal controls in our brain that prevent us from impulsive, rash and aggressive behaviors. Without such inhibitory controls, those under the influence may say things they may not normally utter in similar situations and engage in actions that are uncharacteristic for them. Alcohol plays a role in domestic violence as well. It also increases the risk of suicide.

There is a myth that alcoholism occurs only among men. There is a rise in social drinking among South Asian women, both those born in the US and those who immigrated. Women, including South Asian women of all ages, married and single, and regardless of social status and educational background, can also be alcoholics or problem drinkers. They are able to hide it better and for longer periods of time before the problems surface. Some people believe that drinking only beer or wine is not too bad since it is not hard liquor. I have news for them. Alcohol is alcohol regardless of the form. What comprises 1 standard drink (1.5oz glass/50mL bottle of 80-proof spirit or hard liquor)?



Are you an alcoholic?

How do you know if you are an alcoholic? The following few clues will provide guidance:

Inability to perform functions at home or at work or inability to hold down a job because of the consequences of alcohol. When drinking contributes to accidents, injuries and significant changes in behavior. Feeling the need for a drink upon waking up to calm the nerves. Feeling guilty of drinking too much or a need to cut down. Feeling annoyed by your family's criticism of your drinking.

What should you do once you become aware that you are a problem drinker and don't know when to stop after that first drink? First you need to overcome your feelings of shame and stigma and reach out for help. Although it is very hard, admit to the problem and speak with your family. They care about you.

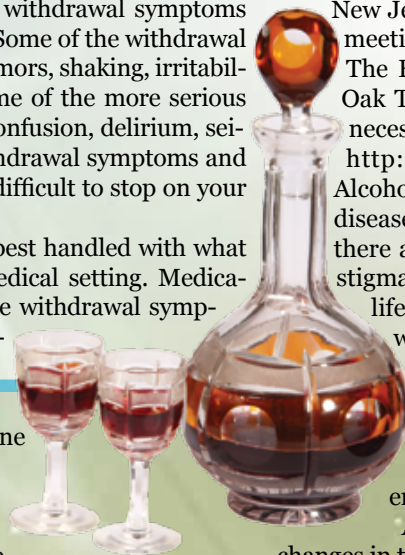
When you have been consuming alcohol on a regular basis, chances are that your body and brain are physiologically dependent on it. In other words, you are addicted to it. You experience withdrawal symptoms when you try to stop drinking. Some of the withdrawal symptoms are nervousness, tremors, shaking, irritability, and difficulty sleeping. Some of the more serious withdrawal problems include confusion, delirium, seizures, and even death. The withdrawal symptoms and cravings to drink make it very difficult to stop on your own without professional help.

Withdrawal symptoms are best handled with what is called detoxification in a medical setting. Medication is prescribed to control the withdrawal symptoms and make one comfort-

able. Medication is gradually withdrawn when the withdrawal symptoms resolve. After that an individual should participate in one of a variety of inpatient or outpatient rehabilitation programs. The length of the program depends on the degree of the problem. Your treating mental health/addiction professional will be your best source for this guidance. Often after this period, individuals may continue to have cravings or urges to drink again, especially when they face certain triggers such as passing a liquor store or in social situations that were associated with drinking in the past, as well as stressful situation. Fortunately, we now have several medications that can help control these cravings and reduce the risk of relapse. Some of these medications are acamprosate (Campral) and naltrexone (orally or once a month injection).

Another important tool that has helped many with recovery is regular attendance at an Alcoholics Anonymous or AA meeting. Typically, every town in the US offers such meetings. These are free and are run by those who have recovered and want to help others with recovery. The only criteria for attendance is that one has a drinking problem and a desire to quit drinking. These meetings are confidential and non-judgemental. Here you will find plenty of support and ideas for recovery.

Because many South Asians found it difficult to fit in culturally in such meetings, SAMHIN, a non-profit organization, offers AA meetings in Central New Jersey that are aimed at South Asians. The meetings are held every Thursday 8pm-9pm at The First Presbyterian Church of Iselin, 1295 Oak Tree Road, Iselin, NJ. No appointment is necessary. You can get more information at <http://samhin.org/alcoholics-anonymous/>. Alcohol addiction is best seen as a relapsing disease just like high blood pressure for which there are treatments available. So get past your stigma and shame, and get the help and get your life back. If you have questions, write to us at www.samhin.org



Each of the following equals one standard drink:

- 12 fl. oz. of regular beer
- 12 fl. oz. of malt liquor
- 5 fl. oz. (150mL) of regular wine.

(A regular wine bottle is 750mL and equals 5 standard drinks).

Sometimes, even a little is too much: when you are planning to drive, operate heavy machinery, if you are pregnant or on medications that may interact with alcohol. In the South Asian community, the inability of young people to speak freely with their family about stress may result in their feeling isolated and turning to alcohol. Being raised in a very strict environment in which alcohol is treated as evil and drinking considered immoral may also

increase the risk of drinking in individuals when they experience newly-found independence in college.

Alcohol is addictive. It actually produces changes in the brain that makes it hard to stop drinking.

Its influence results in distorted thinking. The prevalence of alcoholism among the South Asians is likely higher than often perceived. Unfortunately, there is no data on the prevalence of alcoholism in South Asians in the US.

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Mental Health Initiative is a non-profit organization.
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