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

Vasudev N Makhija, MD

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)?
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.

Vasudev N Makhija, MD
Psychiatrist
President, SAMHIN, South Asian Mental Health Initiative is a non-profit organization.

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