

Alcohol: Cutting Back or Quitting Drinking



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Summary: Drinking alcohol is an accepted practice in many societies, but alcohol is a powerful, mind-altering substance and excessive alcohol use can cause problems with mental and emotional health.

Introduction

Many people who drink moderately put themselves and others at risk of alcohol-related harms. These people often believe that only “alcoholics,” people who are dependent on alcohol, cause car accidents or bar brawls. They believe that because they are not dependent themselves, they can drink freely without worrying about the consequences. But the truth is that moderate drinkers cause as much damage as heavy drinkers.

Many moderate drinkers—particularly those who sometimes drink to the point of intoxication—walk a fine line between living normal, productive lives and living recklessly, wearing down the faith and patience of family, friends and co-workers.

Most moderate drinkers could benefit from cutting down on their alcohol intake. Some would be wise to consider quitting drinking altogether. But for many it’s not easy to limit the amount they drink.

Others might not even be sure they have a problem and need some assistance assessing their drinking habits. (Try our Alcohol Reality Check, available at www.alcoholreality.ca, to measure your drinking pattern.)

Pros and Cons of Drinking

Your pros might look something like this

- I like drinking because it makes me become more assertive,
- it makes me feel more relaxed and social,
- I can forget my problems for a while, and
- I like the taste.

Your cons might looking something like this

- The things I don’t like about drinking are
- I spend too much money on alcohol,
- I sometimes do embarrassing things when I drink too much,

- These days I seem to get angry when I drink and
- I've missed work because of hangovers

If you...

- occasionally or more regularly drink too much (more than 4 drinks per occasion for men, or more than 3 drinks for women),
- occasionally drink in situations where no or less alcohol is best (e.g., before driving, in other situations when alertness is required, when using medications, etc.), or find yourself, from one week to the next, in a pattern of drinking heavier amounts (more than 20 drinks a week for men, or more than 10 drinks for women)
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... you are placing yourself, and possibly others, at risk for harm.

Short-term alcohol-related harms include falls, accidents and fights. Long-term harms include chronic health problems and illnesses.

What you can do

If you think it's time to cut down on or quit drinking but don't know where to start, here are some simple steps to help you on your way toward a healthier, harm-free lifestyle.

1. Get ready

- Prepare to make a firm decision about cutting back or quitting by making a list of the pros and cons of drinking that are specific to your life.

If you review your lists and see that the cons outweigh the pros, it's probably time to commit to making some changes to your drinking patterns.

2. Get set

- Set a goal that makes sense to you and that you can stick to. Your goal could involve reducing the amount you drink per occasion, or drinking no alcohol in higher-risk situations (e.g., before driving or other activities when alertness is required). It may involve avoiding intoxication or reducing the total amount you drink through the run of a typical week. Or, it may be a combination of these. You may even choose to quit drinking altogether.
- Whatever your goal, write it down, post it where you will see it regularly and share your plan with someone you trust.

3. Get going

- Take action to reach your goals. That is, help yourself succeed by making changes to your drinking lifestyle and social routine. For example, you could
 - cut back on social activities that involve drinking, try different social activities that don't involve drinking,
 - build in one or two non-drinking days during the week,
 - find alternative ways to deal with anger, boredom or feeling upset, and
 - take note of people, places and times that lead to your drinking even when you don't particularly want to use alcohol.

4. Keep going

- Don't give up on your goals, because change is never easy!
- Celebrate (sensibly, of course!) any positive changes you've made, even tiny ones.
- Consider outside help. Staying committed to cutting down on or quitting drinking may require outside help.

You might simply need a good self-help manual, such as *DrinkWise: How to Quit Drinking or Cut Down* by Martha Sanchez-Craig. This book features a step-by-step program to effectively quit or cut down on drinking by teaching people to identify the situations and feelings that trigger heavy drinking. (Published 1995 / 82 pages / ISBN 0-88868-215-8.)

Quick tips for cutting down on your drinking

- Drink slowly and avoid pressure from others to pick up the pace.
- Set a limit to your drinking time.
- Eat food both before and while drinking.
- Avoid salty snacks that increase your thirst.
- Have a glass of water or some other non-alcoholic beverage between alcohol drinks.
- Choose light beer or other low-alcohol drinks.
- Refill your own glasses, keep track of your drinks and avoid topping up your drinks.
- Keep less alcohol at home.
- Track changes in your drinking pattern by keeping a diary, recording how much you drink and noting the circumstances in which you drink (i.e., where, with whom, and for what reason).

When to seek professional help

If your desire for alcohol is strong, if you have difficulty stopping after two or three drinks, or if you continue to use alcohol even though it's causing problems, your drinking may have evolved into alcohol dependency.

See your health care professional if this is the case!

Alcohol dependency is a serious condition involving physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual elements. Some people are able to recover from alcohol dependency on their own. However, many people have better results with counseling or treatment.

Getting help

Most provinces have a provincial helpline that you can call (anonymously) in order to find out where to go for help in your community.

For more information

Contact the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) for more information. Web: www.cmha.ca

Acknowledgements

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