Assessment of Alcohol Abuse

People often wonder, “How much is too much alcohol?” “When does drinking alcohol become a problem for the user?” According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), drinking becomes too much when it causes or elevates the risk for alcohol-related problems or complicates the management of other health problems. Men who drink 5 or more standard drinks in a day (or 15 or more per week) and women who drink 4 or more in a day (or 8 or more per week) are at increased risk for alcohol-related problems.

A diagnosis of alcohol abuse requires that the patient meet one or more of the following criteria, occurring at any time in the same 12-month period, and not meet the criteria for alcohol dependence. All questions are prefaced by “In the past 12 months…”

- **Failure to fulfill major role obligations at work, school, or home**
  - because of recurrent drinking:
    - Have you had a period when your drinking – or being sick from drinking – often interfered with taking care of your home or family? Caused job troubles? School problems?

- **Recurrent drinking in hazardous situations:**
  - Have you more than once driven a car or other vehicle while you were drinking? Or after having had too much to drink?
  - Have you gotten into situations while drinking or after drinking that increased your chances of getting hurt – like swimming, using machinery, or walking in a dangerous area or around heavy traffic?
- **Recurrent legal problems related to alcohol:**
  - *Have you gotten arrested, been held at a police station, or had any other legal problems because of your drinking?*

- **Continued use despite recurrent interpersonal or social problems:**
  - *Have you continued to drink even though you knew it was causing you trouble with your friends or family?*
  - *Have you gotten into physical fights while drinking or right after drinking?*

For more information about alcohol and alcohol abuse, please see “Helping Patients Who Drink Too Much: A Clinician’s Guide” or visit NIAAA’s website at [www.niaaa.nih.gov](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov)

For further information regarding this article or related issues, please contact Karen Kuehn Howell, Ph.D. at the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 1256 Briarcliff Road, N.E., Suite 309W, Atlanta, Georgia, 30306. You can also phone us at 404-712-9829 or visit our website at [http://www.emory.edu/MSACD](http://www.emory.edu/MSACD)

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