Assessment of Alcohol Dependence

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 dependence requires that the patient meet three or more of the following criteria, occurring at any time in the same 12-month period. All questions are prefaced by “In the past 12 months…”

- **Tolerance:**
  
  o *Have you found that you have to drink much more than you once did to get the effect you want? Or that your usual number of drinks has much less effect on you than it once did?*

- **Withdrawal syndrome or drinking to relieve withdrawal:**
  
  o *When the effects of alcohol are wearing off, have you had trouble sleeping? Found yourself shaking? Nervous? Nauseous? Restless? Sweating or with you heart beating fast? Have you sensed things that aren’t really there? Had seizures?*

  o *Have you taken a drink or used any drug or medicine (other than over-the-counter pain relievers) to keep from having bad aftereffects of drinking? Or to get over them?*
- **Impaired control:**
  - Have you more than once wanted to stop or cut down on your drinking? Or tried more than once to stop or cut down but found you couldn’t?

- **Drinking more or longer than intended:**
  - Have you had times when you ended up drinking more than you meant to? Or kept on drinking for longer than you intended?

- **Neglect of activities:**
  - In order to drink, have you given up or cut down on activities that were important or interesting to you or gave you pleasure?

- **Time spent related to drinking or recovering:**
  - Have you had a period when you spent a lot of time drinking? Or, being sick or getting over the bad aftereffects of drinking?

- **Continued use despite recurrent psychological or physical problems:**
  - Have you continued to drink even though you knew it was making you feel depressed or anxious? Or causing a health problem or making one worse? Or after having had a blackout?

For more information about alcohol and **alcohol dependence** 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)

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