



ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION: HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

Excessive drinking can lead to a variety of health risks, both immediate (such as alcohol-related crashes or falls and alcohol poisoning) and long-term (including heart and liver disease, cancer, mental health problems, and substance use disorders). Social or moderate use of alcohol can become problematic, especially when people turn to alcohol more frequently and in larger quantities to cope with stress, anxiety, or difficult emotions.

BUT HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

Low-risk drinking is defined differently for men and women by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). For women, low-

risk drinking is no more than 3 drinks on any single day and no more than 7 drinks per week. For men, it is defined as no more than 4 drinks on any single day and no more than 14 drinks per week. (It's worth noting "low-risk" does not mean "no risk.")

The USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends that adults of legal drinking age can choose not to drink, or to drink in **moderation** by limiting intake to 2 drinks or less in a day for men or 1 drink or less in a day for women, on days when alcohol is consumed.

When consumption exceeds those amounts, it is classified as **binge drinking** or heavy alcohol use. The CDC

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COUNSELOR CORNER

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Q: I often have a drink or two after a stressful day. Is that a problem?

A: This is a common practice for many people, but common does not mean risk-free and you are wise to take a look at this if it has become a regular pattern. There are people who simply enjoy a glass of wine or a cocktail before dinner and can maintain that behavior without increasing consumption or it negatively impacting their life. However, for many people, this pattern can turn into a habit that leads to dependency, health issues, and relationship problems.

The key to determining if this is becoming a problem for you is to honestly take a look at your drinking patterns and be mindful of when and why you are reaching for that

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glass. Once we begin to understand why we are drinking, we can explore options for addressing those underlying needs in a healthier manner.

Here are some things to ask yourself:

1. How often and how much do I drink?

In our super-sized world of serving portions, it's important to know what counts as "a drink" when determining how much you are consuming. For example, a serving of beer is 12 ounces, wine is 5 ounces, and spirits (vodka, gin, whiskey, etc.) is 1.5 ounces. More than 3 servings of alcohol a day, and more than 7 servings of alcohol in a week, is considered binge drinking. Based on this, how are much are you truly consuming?

2. Does alcoholism and/or excessive drinking run in my family?

If chemical dependency issues run in your family, it does not guarantee you will develop a dependency, but it does increase the risk significantly. As with any other health risks, knowing this can help you to be mindful of the warning signs and reach out for help if needed.

3. Am I drinking to cope with my stress?

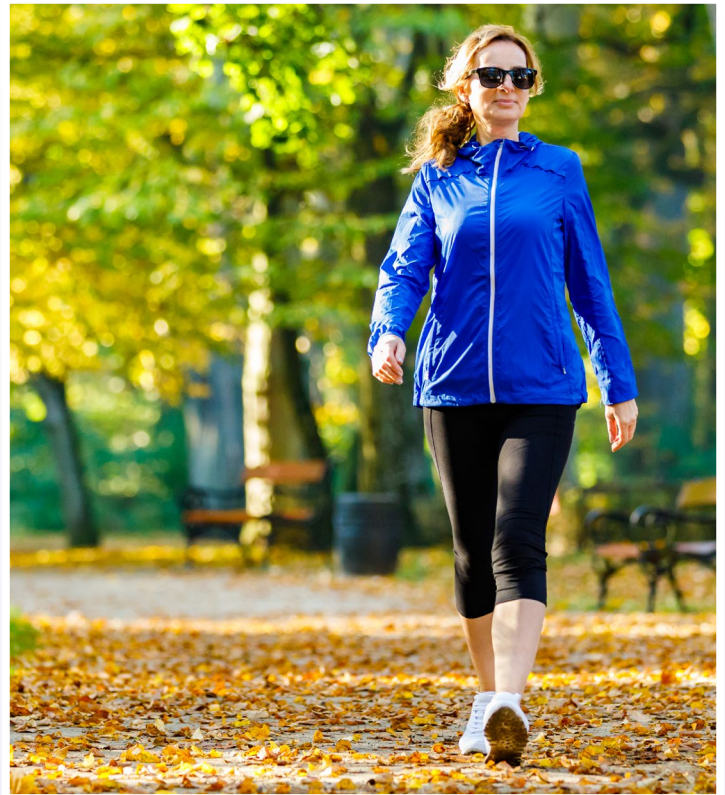
While drinking might "take the edge off" of a stressful day, it actually does not help us process our emotions or move through the stress. Instead, it masks our stress/emotions through a temporary "rosy glow" of alcohol that eventually disrupts our sleep and can cause depression. Meanwhile the stress/emotions are still there. Each day we come home stressed and pour alcohol over our emotions to cope, we compound the issue.

Another important point is that as we develop a tolerance for alcohol, we need more and more of it to get the same effect, and this can lead to complications of overconsumption and binge drinking.

Things to try if you are using alcohol to cope with stress and pent-up emotions: Journal, go for a walk, talk to a trusted friend or family member, exercise, and give yourself the same compassion you would give a friend who is struggling.

4. Is reaching for a drink the only way I reward myself?

Too many times we ignore our need for self-care and relaxation. We keep ourselves running on a treadmill of "to-do" lists until we are feeling worn-out, neglected, and depleted. Alcohol, like food, can become the quick fix we reach for to feel a moment of relief and reward for getting through the day. The problem is that these quick fixes don't typically address the real issue or give us the nurturing we need to truly feel better. Over time, these quick fixes can compound our feelings of being worn-out with guilt and critical self-talk.



If this is the case, you need to add more options to your list of rewards! Find other things that you enjoy and make you feel nurtured. For example, swap out the alcohol for nonalcoholic drinks that you enjoy and use a special glass. Go for a walk. Take a 20-minute nap. Engage in a creative project or activity that you enjoy, such as gardening. Find ways to take self-care breaks that fill you up and restore your sense of balance.

Know that we at The Village EAP are here to help. Please call us at **1-800-627-8220** if you would like to explore options for creating healthy patterns that truly support your health and well-being.

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defines binge drinking as 5 or more drinks for a man and 4 or more drinks for a woman on the same occasion. It describes **heavy drinking** as 8 or more drinks per week for women, or 15 drinks or more per week for men.

A new trend identified by the NIAAA is referred to as **high-intensity drinking**, or consuming alcohol at twice the binge drinking threshold. "Compared with people who did not binge drink, people who drank alcohol at twice the gender-specific binge drinking thresholds were 70 times more likely to have an alcohol-related emergency department visit, and those who consumed alcohol at 3 times the gender-specific binge thresholds were 93 times more likely to have an alcohol-related visit," the NIAAA reports.

For some individuals, any amount of alcohol would be defined as excessive, including people younger than 21; women who are

pregnant or may be pregnant; people on certain medications or who live with certain medical conditions; those who are driving, planning to drive or participating in other activities that require skill, coordination and alertness; and people in recovery or who cannot control the amount they drink.

ARE YOU CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR DRINKING?

The Village Employee Assistance Program encourages you to access the **CheckUp & Choices website**. Visit this site for a free, confidential screening and objective feedback related to your alcohol use.

Your EAP covers specific services related to alcohol and drug issues, including assessments, prevention education, and post-treatment counseling. Call **1-800-627-8220** for more information. Be sure to say that you are accessing your Village EAP benefit.



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