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Alcohol Dependence

While a majority of Americans are able to have an occasional alcoholic beverage without repercussion or harm, approximately 10% of the population is unable to do so. Early researchers on alcoholism, now referred to as alcohol dependence, described it as an, “allergy of mind, body, and spirit,” that alters personality and diminishes an individual’s ability to function in family, community, and social settings. For individuals who are alcohol dependent, the younger the age that drinking commences and the longer time that alcohol dependency is active, the more extensive the damage to physical health, family functioning, financial viability, and recovery potential.

Concurrent disorders, meaning more than one illness occurring in the same person at the same time, increase over the course of a lifetime and chronic alcohol dependence has been linked with increased levels of illness, disability and preventable death across the life span. Alcohol dependence has been linked by the World Health Organization as to the preventable onset of 67 other chronic diseases.

Symptoms of Alcohol Dependence

At least three of the following symptoms must occur within a 12 month period for Alcohol Dependence to be diagnosed.

- Tolerance is the need to drink increasing amounts of alcohol to become intoxicated.
- Withdrawal occurs after stopping drinking or drinking occurs to interrupt withdrawal.
- More alcohol is consumed for a longer period than intended by the drinker
- There is an ongoing desire to control or stop alcohol use but attempts at control fail.
- Increasing time is spent on using or recovering from the effects of drinking alcohol.
- Important family, work, or social obligations are neglected due to drinking.
- Continued drinking when other health problems will be made worse by the drinking.

Causes of Alcohol Dependence

Genetics and environment appear to play an equal part in the development of alcohol dependence. Children of alcoholics are 50-60% more likely to develop alcohol dependence than those in the general population. In terms of genetics and environment, children of alcoholic experience the greatest risk.

Brain imaging technology has shed new light on the effects of alcohol on the brain. Difficulty walking, blurred vision, slurred speech, and slow reaction times: clearly alcohol affects the brain. Chronic, heavy alcohol use damages the brain beginning with mild “memory slips,” to permanent damage requiring custodial care. The factors that effect how and to what extent alcohol affects the brain are: how much and how often a person drinks; age of onset- the earlier age that alcohol use starts the more likely long term damage; family history of alcoholism; general health status. In short, the more damage sustained by the brain, the less likely the chances of sustained recovery.

Treatment of Alcohol Dependence

More than 700,000 people receive substance dependence treatment on any given day. Alcohol dependence is now being viewed as a chronic disease, much like diabetes or heart disease, which must be managed by the person with the disorder. Given the significant brain impairment that accompanies chronic and/or intense intoxication, detoxification of the alcohol dependent individual is the necessary first step. Depending on the overall health status and chronic nature of the disease, this can be done at a treatment center or in a medical facility.

While no medications “cure” alcohol dependence, there are a variety of medications which may be used to treat withdrawal symptoms, reduce craving or act as a deterrent to drinking. Evidence indicates that medication alone is not effective without counseling, residential treatment or attendance at 12-step support groups. The best outcomes may be a combination of the above.

Cognitive-behavior therapy is used with sober patients to increase coping skills and develop a sober disease management plan. Dialectical Behavioral Therapy is used to address emotional coping skills that are often lacking in early sobriety. Alcoholics Anonymous is a world-wide network of recovering alcoholics who assist each other in staying sober and repairing the damage done by alcohol dependence. It is free of charge and meetings occur daily in most communities.

Residential treatment often lasts from 10-28 days. It allows newly sober individuals an intensive treatment experience that includes detoxification, education on addiction, twelve-step facilitation, individual/family/group therapy, and a host of evidence-based practices designed to equip newly sober individuals with a skill set and insights to promote ongoing sobriety.

Resources

<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov>; <http://ncadistore.samhsa.gov/catalog/top.aspx>; <http://www.aa.org>; or <http://www.al-anon.alateen.org>.