

Alcohol and Society

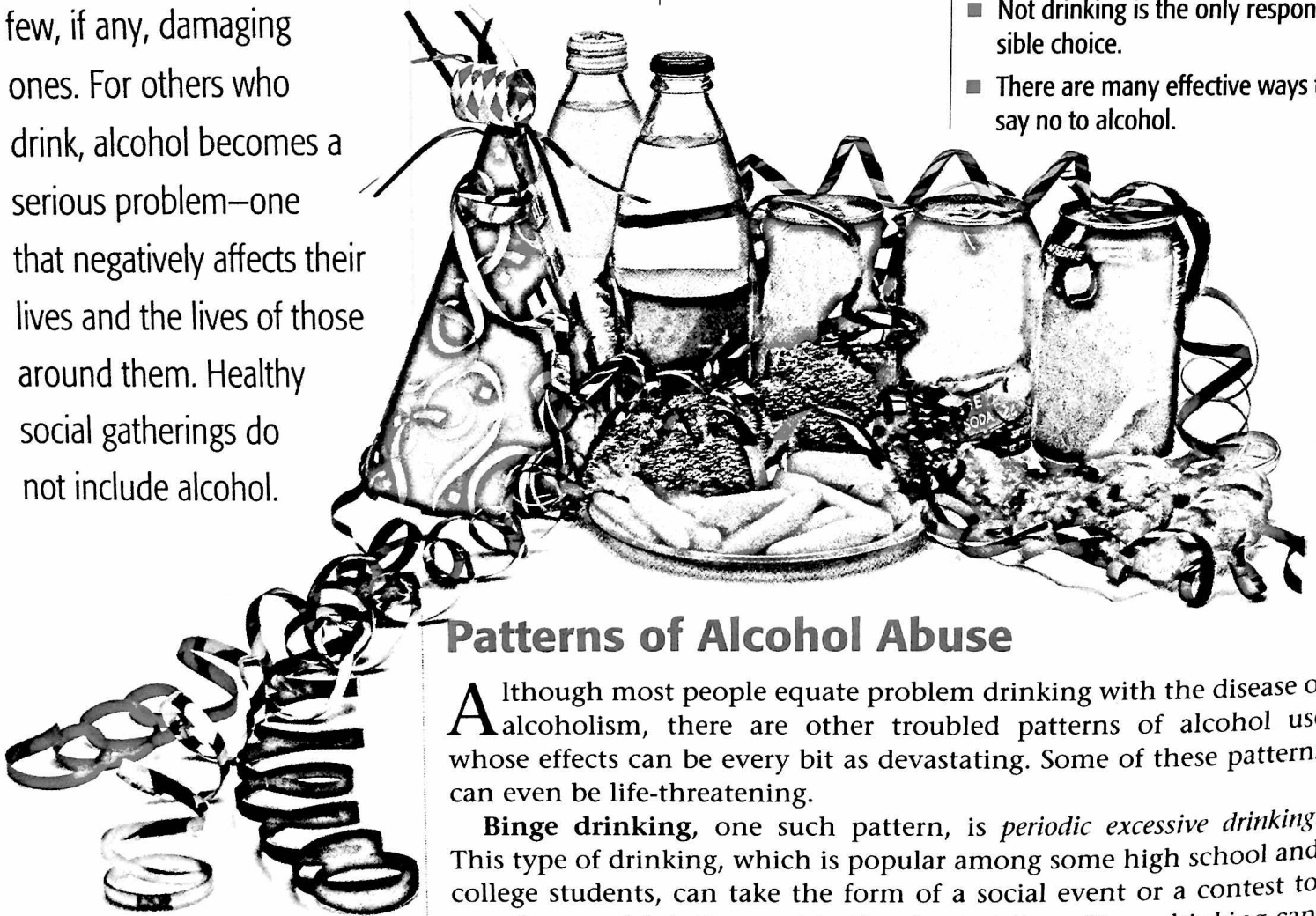
For some adults, alcohol used occasionally and with moderation has pleasurable effects and few, if any, damaging ones. For others who drink, alcohol becomes a serious problem—one that negatively affects their lives and the lives of those around them. Healthy social gatherings do not include alcohol.

HEALTH TERMS

binge drinking
alcohol poisoning
alcoholism
delirium tremens (DTs)

HEALTH CONCEPTS

- You do not have to be an alcoholic to get in trouble with alcohol.
- Alcoholism is a chronic disease that can be treated with total abstinence.
- Alcoholism imposes heavy costs on the family of the alcoholic and on society.
- Not drinking is the only responsible choice.
- There are many effective ways to say no to alcohol.



Patterns of Alcohol Abuse

Although most people equate problem drinking with the disease of alcoholism, there are other troubled patterns of alcohol use whose effects can be every bit as devastating. Some of these patterns can even be life-threatening.

Binge drinking, one such pattern, is *periodic excessive drinking*. This type of drinking, which is popular among some high school and college students, can take the form of a social event or a contest to see who can drink the most in the shortest time. Binge drinking can lead to serious difficulties. Some binge drinkers mistakenly believe that they are not really in trouble with alcohol because they do not drink every day. However, even alcoholics can go days on end without drinks until later stages of their disease.

A danger associated more with binge drinking than with any other pattern of alcohol abuse is **alcohol poisoning**. This is a *dangerous toxic condition that occurs when a person drinks a large amount of alcohol in a short period of time*. Generally, when a person's blood alcohol level reaches about 400 milligrams per deciliter—four times the legal limit for driving under the influence—the brain's ability to control breathing can be interrupted. Death can result.

Alcoholism

Many myths and misconceptions surround the pattern of alcohol abuse called *alcoholism*. Many people, for example, erroneously believe it is just a passing state when in fact **alcoholism**—*a physical and psychological dependence on the drug ethanol*—is a disease. Another myth is that all alcoholics are “falling down” drunk and, hence, easily recognized. Although it is true that some people reach this extreme, a great many alcoholics appear clean, orderly, and well groomed. One common denominator that does exist among alcoholics is this: They all need help.

Traits of the Alcoholic

Alcoholics are unable to stop drinking despite the toll it takes on their health and their lives. People with alcoholism may exhibit one or a combination of these behaviors or traits:

- They are preoccupied in one way or another with alcohol.
- Once they pick up the first drink, they cannot promise or predict what they will say or do or how much they will drink.
- They cannot manage tension without drinking.
- They may have personality changes or memory lapses due to drinking.

Stages of Alcoholism

There are three clearly defined stages of alcoholism that happen over a period of time. The time span can be long or short, depending on the individual and the age at which he or she started drinking. The American Medical Association states that alcoholism develops in three phases: abuse, dependence, and addiction.

STAGE ONE

Alcoholism typically begins with social drinking, often to relax or to relieve stress or depression. Gradually, this kind of drinking becomes necessary to manage stress. A physical and psychological dependency on alcohol develops. The person begins to drink and become intoxicated regularly. The drinker may have short-term memory loss and blackouts—times when he or she cannot remember with whom he or she was drinking or what was said or done after each drinking episode. Often, at this stage, the drinker makes excuses

Did You Know?

- It is estimated that there are between 10 and 16 million alcoholics in the U.S.
- It has been estimated that 1 in 20 Americans is addicted to alcohol.
- Research is beginning to show some evidence that genetics may be a contributing factor in alcoholism.
- A low intoxication response, or failing to show the outward signs of drunkenness as quickly as others, may be an early adulthood predictor of later alcoholism, particularly among young men whose fathers are alcoholic.



From health.glencoe.com, link to the M.A.D.D. home page to learn about alcohol myths and facts, the negative effects of alcohol, and advice for teens about avoiding alcohol. How can you inform people about the dangers of drinking and driving?



Signs a Friend May Have a Drinking Problem

- odor on breath
- glassy eyes
- trouble remembering or concentrating
- sudden emotional or angry outbursts
- changes in choice of friends
- changes in appearance
- absences from school
- falling grades
- unexplained accidents, bruises, cuts
- irritability
- being overly sensitive
- poor coordination
- slow reflexes
- slurred speech

and tries to rationalize his or her drinking behavior. His or her tolerance to alcohol increases, meaning more is needed to feel the same effects. He or she may be called a problem drinker by others.

STAGE TWO

Gradually, the person reaches a point where he or she cannot stop drinking. In other words, the person is now physically dependent on the drug. He or she may drink alone and may drink every day, and the craving for a drink may occur earlier and earlier in the day. Physical and mental problems may become evident. More excuses are made for drinking, and often, others are blamed for what happens. At this stage of the disease, defensive behavior is evident. The drinker denies or tries to hide the problem. The body has developed a tolerance, and more alcohol is necessary. Drinking becomes the central event in the person's life. Performance on the job, at school, or at home decreases. Frequent absences from school, work, or other commitments occur.

STAGE THREE

In the final and worst stage of the disease, drinking is more important in the person's life than everything else. The problem can no longer be denied, and it is also uncontrolled. There may be hallucinations. Alcohol becomes a constant companion. The alcoholic becomes aggressive and is isolated from friends and family. Malnutrition results because the drinker overlooks his or her nutritional needs. The body is addicted to the drug. At this stage, the person has fallen apart physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially. He or she also now has decreased or reverse tolerance, meaning that it takes less alcohol

Making Responsible

Decisions

Saying No to a Drinking Driver

Lenny, who won't be 16 for another three months, is at a party with his friend Rod and some of Rod's friends, whom he's never met before. A little while ago, when Lenny looked over at Rod, he



saw Rod and one of his friends drinking a beer. Lenny has to be

home in half an hour, and it doesn't look like Rod is ready to leave—or in any shape to drive.

Lenny could call home for a ride, but he's afraid of how the other teens at the party might react. He's even more afraid,

however—and rightfully so—about getting into Rod's car.

What Would You Do?

Apply the six steps of the decision-making process to Lenny's problem.

1. **State the situation.**
2. **List the options.**
3. **Weigh the possible outcomes.**
4. **Consider your values.**
5. **Make a decision and act.**
6. **Evaluate the decision.**

to cause drunkenness. If the alcoholic stopped drinking, he or she would experience the withdrawal symptoms associated with alcoholism, called **delirium tremens** (DTs), *the dramatic physical and psychological effects of alcohol withdrawal*. These consist of hot and cold flashes, severe tremors, nightmares, hallucinations, and having fear of people and animals. People with DTs need prompt medical attention.



Although alcoholism cannot be cured, it definitely can be treated. As many as two-thirds of all alcoholics recover with proper treatment. The goal of the various programs to treat alcoholism is to stop or control the intake of alcohol. Several sources are available to help people who have a drinking problem. Help is also available for the families and friends of people who have a drinking problem. These programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Alateen, are discussed in Chapter 27.

Costs to the Family

It is estimated that there are more than 3 million teen alcoholics. Up to 5 million young people in this country are considered to be alcoholics or problem drinkers. In addition, alcohol use, abuse, and alcoholism are major factors in the four leading causes of accidental death: car crashes, falls, drownings, and burns caused by fire. They are also factors in 20 to 35 percent of all suicides and play a major part in **domestic violence**, spousal and child abuse, abuse of the elderly, and marital separation and divorce. Alcoholism is one of the leading stressors and factors in troubled families. People who are involved with alcoholics and whose lives are enmeshed in the alcoholic's problems are called *co-alcoholics* or *codependents* and suffer from **codependency**. By living with chronic alcoholism, they learn to ignore their own needs and center all of their energy on the alcoholic, losing trust and self-esteem, and sometimes damaging their own health in the process. Their suffering, like that of the alcoholic, is enormous.

Costs to Society

Alcohol is a major factor in the three leading causes of death for 16- to 24-year-olds. These are traffic crashes, homicides, and suicides. In all, alcohol claims about 100,000 Americans a year. Off the highway, alcohol contributes to about 6 million nonfatal and 15,000 fatal injuries per year. In the workplace, up to 40 percent of industrial fatalities and 47 percent of industrial injuries can be linked to alcohol.

▲ **The heavy use of alcohol is often a cause of serious family problems, including child abuse, abuse of the elderly, and domestic violence.**

ACTIVITY Name three steps that a person who lives in a family with active alcoholism might take to get help for himself or herself.

h t link

domestic violence For more information on domestic violence, including spousal abuse, child abuse, and elderly abuse, see Chapter 12, page 286.

codependency For more information on codependency and help for the codependent, see Chapter 27, page 608.



▲ **You have a choice in the kind of life you wish to lead.**
ACTIVITY Think of the priorities in your life and list the choices that will allow you to fulfill your dreams.

Did You Know?

- Alcohol has been linked to over 38 percent of all drownings in this country.
- A study by Johns Hopkins University showed that of all of the bicycle accidents in Maryland between 1987 and 1994, over one-third of those involving people over ten years old were caused by someone who had been drinking.
- Alcohol is linked to all of the leading causes of death among teens in the United States.

in 3,500 high schools across the country registered in a program to abstain from using drugs and alcohol on prom night. This is just one of many efforts across the country in which teens themselves have come forward to declare that they intend to stay alcohol free and drug free.

Choosing to Be Alcohol-Free

Despite the rise in teen drinking, many teens are deciding to remain or become alcohol-free. The most common reason given for not drinking is: "I do not need it." Some teens who choose not to drink seem to be saying, "I don't have to drink to be popular," or "I don't need to drink to be accepted, to have fun, or to act in some way that I usually wouldn't."

Saying No to Alcohol

Saying no to drinking takes a firm mental commitment from you before you go to a party or other social situation where alcohol may be served. Practicing what you are going to say in such situations can help prepare you for the event. Whatever you do to turn down a drink, keep it brief, polite, confident, and to the point. Sometimes humor or the unexpected, creative comment can do the trick.

Alcohol and Sexual Activity

Alcohol affects a person's judgment and may interfere with self-control over one's emotions, decisions, and behavior. It may cause a

In 1996, the estimated cost for drug abuse was \$83 billion and for alcoholism, \$116 billion. According to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, alcohol abuse costs employers an estimated \$30 billion every year in lost revenue. In addition, about half of all hospitalizations, excluding those related to childbirth, are linked to alcohol.

However, when it comes to alcoholism, there is good news and a lot of hope. More people than ever before are joining self-help support groups to get sober, and more young people than ever before are entering treatment centers and programs for their alcohol-related problems. The best news of all is that many people, including many teens, are deciding never to drink at all. During one recent spring, almost 3 million students

person to do or say things he or she otherwise would not normally do, including engaging in sexual activity. Some people who are shy or otherwise socially uncomfortable may use alcohol as an “ice-breaker” only to find themselves in a place or situation that they later regret. This behavior is extremely unhealthy. HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancies, ruined reputations, date rape, and other violence can result from mixing alcohol with social relationships. Remember that making the decision to practice **abstinence** from all risk behaviors, including alcohol use, is the best way to avoid injury and illness and to maintain good health.

Which Life Do You Choose?

Picture a car being driven by a sober, careful, respectful driver. It goes at a reasonable pace, moves carefully, and makes turns only when necessary. With a destination in mind, the driver steers the car in the desired direction until it reaches its goal. Now picture a car being driven by a drunk driver. It rambles, weaves, stops and starts, and perhaps even crashes.

So it is with your life. You can choose to live an alcohol-free life in which you pursue your goals and work steadily at reaching them, or you can get sidetracked and thrown off course altogether by using alcohol. When you come right down to it, there’s only one healthful choice to make: to be alcohol-free.