



# BATTLING THE BOTTLE

When does a fondness for wine and spirits transform into full-blown alcoholism? In this cover story, we highlight the boozy dangers of alcohol abuse and the various forms of treatment commonly employed.





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People who experience high levels of stress or deep, emotional pain are also at risk of becoming alcohol addicts, as are those who started drinking at an early age. Another factor are those with very stressful jobs. Networking, late hours in the office, tight deadlines and the pressures at work can all lead to a dependency on alcohol. Social and cultural norms also play a part. Those whose spouses drink are less likely to think twice about drinking themselves. Peer pressure from drinking friends can likewise lead eventually to addiction.

### DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT OF ALCOHOLISM

Like other forms of addiction, alcoholism can be beaten. Through medical treatments and counselling programmes, alcoholics can go back to leading normal, productive lives. But for this to happen, people who are addicted to alcohol must first own up to the facts.

“Treatment for alcoholism can begin when the individual makes a commitment to do something about his drinking problem, but alcoholics often hide the extent of their drinking problem from others. A major hallmark of addiction is denial,”

explains Mr Viknesan.

This unwillingness to admit to an alcohol problem often means that patients are left suffering for many more years than is necessary. Many seek treatment only as a last resort, when self-enforced abstinence fails.

The thing to note, however, is this: Alcoholism is a condition that is hard to cure without some form of professional help. In fact, abstinence without proper supervision can result in withdrawal symptoms, seizures and a potentially fatal condition known as delirium tremens.

For this reason, it is vital that family members of alcoholics take an active part in helping their loved ones seek treatment. To do this, they should look out for tell-tale signs.

“Tell-tale signs include, among other things, hiding the drinking, minimising the problems caused by the drinking, an inability to keep family and work commitments, falling performances at work or in school, frequent absenteeism, isolating oneself from others, poor and irregular eating habits, sleep problems, and poor general health,” says Mr Viknesan.

A doctor who suspects an alcohol problem may ask the

What's more, alcohol is a significant source of calories, and drinking may stimulate over-eating, particularly in social settings. This is because calories in liquids may fail to trigger the physiologic mechanism that produces the feeling of fullness.

"With the combination of calorie-rich alcoholic beverages and eating after bouts of drinking, there is a possible relationship between frequent alcohol use and obesity," highlights Dr Wu.

Apart from physical harm, alcoholics can also suffer intense mental distress. Alcohol-induced depression can lead to self-harm, low-esteem, poor self-confidence, anger and frustration. All these, in turn, could contribute to a breakdown in relationships, between alcoholic parents and children, and between spouses, cautions Mr Viknesan S B, Counsellor, National Addictions Management Services, IMH.

Even should an alcoholic escape ill health as a direct result of his alcohol addiction, a large number of intoxicated people each year hurt themselves unintentionally — stepping out of the bus before it has stopped, stumbling into road traffic, falling down stairs, walking into machinery, doors and windows. The list is as long as it is incredible.

### WHAT CAUSES ALCOHOLISM?

In Singapore, alcohol addicts are usually male. Out of every 10, between eight or nine are men. Of these, over 60 per cent belong to the age range of between 35 and 54. Each year, IMH sees about 230 new cases of alcohol addiction.

Worldwide, it is estimated that about one in every 10 people are either alcoholic or borderline alcoholic. There are several risk factors that could lead one to fill up on alcohol. One of which is genetics.

"A number of scientific studies have demonstrated a strong link between genes and alcoholism. These studies have shown that children of alcoholic parents — especially sons of alcoholic fathers — are four to nine times more likely to develop an addiction to alcohol, compared to children of non-alcoholic parents," highlights Dr Wu.

According to him, children born to alcoholic parents, but adopted and raised by non-alcoholics, still carry a higher risk for alcoholism, although positive environmental factors can offer some buffer.

Perhaps the important thing to note is that alcohol addiction does not occur overnight. It doesn't pounce, but creep up over time.

### DRINK & DRIVE?

#### Don't even think about it!

It's a Friday night and you're out having a good time with a bunch of close friends. You haven't had a drink at all the whole week and you're looking forward to it, but just at the last minute, you are given the dubious honour of being the night's designated driver.

Could you chance a glass of whisky, or perhaps a pint of beer? Why should you be left out of all the fun and enjoyment? After all, surely a glass or two isn't too much... or is it?

According to experts, how well we handle our drinks vary because all of us absorb alcohol at different rates. Factors that affect this include your weight, sex, metabolism, the strength of your drink and whether you've eaten beforehand.

As for blood alcohol limits, Singapore makes it illegal for drivers to have more than 0.08 per cent of blood alcohol content (BAC). Anyone who surpasses this figure can be punished with a fine, license suspension and even jail. BAC is the concentration of alcohol in a person's blood. It is most commonly used as a measure of intoxication.

These days, with advancement in consumer technologies, any motorist can buy a breathalyzer at a departmental store or pharmacy for less than \$50. It works exactly like a thermometer and is not much bulkier than one, too.

So for those who do give in to the temptation of a regular pint, make sure you have your instrument handy. If it clears you, you are good to go. Otherwise, you'd be running the chance of putting you and your friends in serious danger of injury.

The table (right) will give you an idea how much a slight percentage change in your blood alcohol content can make a vast difference to your health and your driving abilities.

### THE PROGRESSIVE EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL

Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) %	Behavioural Characteristics	Impairment
0.03 – 0.059	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Mild euphoria</li> <li>▶ Sense of well-being</li> <li>▶ Relaxation</li> <li>▶ Talkativeness</li> <li>▶ Decreased inhibition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Alertness</li> <li>▶ Judgment</li> <li>▶ Coordination</li> <li>▶ Concentration</li> </ul>
0.06 – 0.10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Blunted feelings</li> <li>▶ Disinhibition</li> <li>▶ Extroversion</li> <li>▶ Impaired sexual pleasures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Reflexes</li> <li>▶ Reasoning</li> <li>▶ Depth perception</li> <li>▶ Distance acuity</li> <li>▶ Peripheral vision</li> <li>▶ Glare recovery</li> </ul>
0.11–0.20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Over-expression</li> <li>▶ Emotional swings</li> <li>▶ Anger or sadness</li> <li>▶ Boisterous</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Reaction time</li> <li>▶ Gross motor control</li> <li>▶ Staggering</li> <li>▶ Slurred speech</li> </ul>
0.21–0.29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Stupor</li> <li>▶ Loss of understanding</li> <li>▶ Impaired sensations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Severe motor impairment</li> <li>▶ Loss of consciousness</li> <li>▶ Memory blackout</li> </ul>
0.30–0.39	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Severe depression</li> <li>▶ Unconsciousness</li> <li>▶ Death possible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Bladder function</li> <li>▶ Breathing</li> <li>▶ Heart rate</li> </ul>



**“A NUMBER OF SCIENTIFIC STUDIES HAVE DEMONSTRATED A STRONG LINK BETWEEN GENES AND ALCOHOLISM. THESE STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLIC PARENTS — ESPECIALLY SONS OF ALCOHOLIC FATHERS — ARE FOUR TO NINE TIMES MORE LIKELY TO DEVELOP AN ADDICTION TO ALCOHOL, COMPARED TO CHILDREN OF NON-ALCOHOLIC PARENTS.”**

“Alcoholism is a chronic, progressive, potentially fatal disease with gradual loss of control over one’s drinking. Like many other diseases, it has a generally predictable course, recognised symptoms, and is influenced by both genetic and environmental factors. The compulsive drinking behaviour is also part of the disease,” says Dr Wu.

According to him, excessive use or abuse of alcohol can lead to severe health problems, even coma and death.

“In the short term, alcohol can become toxic if ingested in a large enough quantity over a short period of time. This is especially true if alcohol is taken concurrently with medications or drugs that affect the brain,” he warns.

The toxicity involved is related to the levels of alcohol in the blood. Coma can occur, as can respiratory depression, loss of protective reflexes, and death. Over time, the damage that

alcohol can do is no less damaging.

“The most common physical health problem associated with alcoholism involves the gastrointestinal tract. In the stomach, ulcers can develop. Long-term alcohol use can also result in liver damage, cirrhosis and liver cancer,” outlines Dr Wu.

Chronic alcoholism can also cause pancreatitis, as well as heart-related complications such as hypertension.

As alcohol acts primarily on the brain, acute intoxication can result in a loss of normal brain functions. This can manifest in many ways — disturbances in emotions, impaired judgment, slurred speech, impaired motor and sensory functions, and loss of consciousness.

“Chronic use has been associated with peripheral neuropathy, Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome and dementia as well,” adds Dr Wu.

BY MELISSA HENG

Does having a martini every night constitute alcoholism? What about a can or two of beer after a hard day's labour, or double servings of cocktail on a Saturday night?

Well, according to doctors and counsellors here, the "tipping point" — where one trips over and falls on the wrong side of the alcohol divide — depends on several things.

For example, do you find yourself looking forward to having the drink earlier and earlier in the day? Does the urge to drink make you irritable, or cause you to lose focus on your daily activities? Do you feel compelled to drink just a little more each time in order to achieve the same level of high?

If your answer is yes to any of the above questions, you may well have an alcohol problem on hand.

"Generally, an alcoholic is someone who continues to drink alcoholic beverages despite health problems; experiences tolerance and suffers withdrawal symptoms when he doesn't drink," says Dr Melvin Wu, Resident Physician, National Addictions Management Services, Institute of Mental Health (IMH).

### WHAT IS ALCOHOL ADDICTION?

Drinking alcohol alters the balance of chemicals in the brain, such as gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), which inhibits impulsiveness, and glutamate, which excites the nervous system. Alcohol also raises the levels of dopamine in the brain, which is associated with the pleasurable aspects of drinking alcohol.

Drinking can deplete or increase the levels of some of these chemicals, causing your body to crave alcohol to restore good feelings or to avoid negative feelings.

The medical community has identified two types of alcohol addiction — physical and psychological. Psychological addiction refers to anyone suffering from marked cravings for alcoholic drinks, or someone who has established a regular routine for alcohol use. These addicts crave the bottle above all else and would increasingly set aside their normal activities for a chance to drink.

Their psychological addiction often goes hand in glove with physical addiction. The latter occurs when a person goes into withdrawal mode and suffers physical symptoms when their drink routine is disrupted for any number of reasons. Such symptoms could include tremors and excessive sweating. ❖





## THE FOUR STAGES OF ALCOHOL ADDICTION

**The Chinese have a saying: You begin by chasing the dragon but then it jumps on your back and begins chasing you. The saying originally referred to drugs, but is true for alcoholism as well.**

Addiction doesn't just happen. In almost all addiction cases, there are several stages or phases that addicts go through, each one progressively worse than before.

### ▶ EXPERIMENTAL STAGE OF ADDICTION

This stage is the kick-off point for many addicts. The trigger that sparks off an experiment with alcohol could be as innocent as simple curiosity. For teens, peer pressure may also play a part.

At this early stage, the drinker may experience a sense of pleasure never before felt, leading him to associate the pleasantries with alcohol consumption.

### ▶ THE RECREATIONAL STAGE OF ADDICTION

During the recreational stage, the drinker may make use of social settings as an excuse to guzzle. At this stage, tolerance for alcohol usage increases and drinkers may start to experience the negative effects of over-boozing not felt previously, such as hangovers.

### ▶ THE EARLY DEPENDENCY STAGE

During this stage, the regular user is on the transition to becoming an abuser. He may now begin to find new ways to accommodate his addiction lifestyle. For the young, they may resort to stealing money to feed the habit.

### ▶ THE FULL DEPENDENCY STAGE

This late stage of addiction is the most serious. At this stage, there is an element of self destruction in the activity and the often compulsive desire to escape into oblivion, or escape from reality. Sobriety is now too difficult to face. If left untreated, the addict may now face despair and risks premature death through overdose, suicide, or accidents.

patient a number of questions regarding drinking habits in order to get an indication of the amount of alcohol he consumes. If answers to those questions indicate possible alcoholism or alcohol abuse, the doctor may do a short screening test using a standardised questionnaire.

The first step in treatment is usually detoxification, which involves medical supervision of the acute physical and psychological symptoms of withdrawal. Rehabilitation and continued care are the next crucial stages.

"We provide treatment in a multi-disciplinary setting, with doctors, nurses, counsellors, psychologists and social workers. Treatment modalities include individual and group counselling, cognitive-behavioural strategies to arrest self-defeating thoughts and behaviours, teaching relapse prevention skills, and family intervention. Medications are a component of treatment," shares Mr Viknesan.

According to him, remaining in treatment for an adequate period is critical in sustaining long-term recovery from alcoholism. As with any addiction, aftercare and group support go a long way to help recovering addicts manage their relapses and cope with necessary lifestyle changes. +

## WHERE TO GET HELP

### INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH Specialist Outpatient Clinic C (Camp)

This specialist outpatient clinic at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) provides comprehensive assessments, treatment planning and case management, relapse prevention training, psycho-education and counselling programmes for addiction patients and their families. The clinic can also refer patients to IMH's inpatient treatment programme and to other community-based agencies or support groups.

The clinic operates from Mondays to Fridays from 8.30am to 5.30pm. For more information, call 6389-2000 or email [camp@imh.com.sg](mailto:camp@imh.com.sg). To make an appointment, call 6389-2200. Addiction helplines are available at 6-RECOVER (6-7326837) for all addictions and 1800-XGAMBLE (1800-9426253) or 1800-6666-8668 for problem gambling.

Community Addictions Management Programme (CAMP) is the outpatient service of IMH's National Addictions Management Service (NAMS). NAMS provides interventions for all forms of addictions, consisting of primarily gambling and behavioural addictions (internet, gaming, etc) and substance addictions (alcohol and drugs).