How to tell if there is an alcohol issue

​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​​

​

​You're likely reading this because you think that you (or someone you know) might have an alcohol issue. But you might not be sure. You might have an idea of what an alcohol issue looks like, but it just doesn't fit with your situation. Does that mean there's no issue?

**What kind of person struggles with alcohol use?**

All kinds of people can struggle with alcohol use. There is not one way to describe a person with an issue. Many people think it means people who aren't working, don't pay bills, don’t meet responsibilities, or have to drink every day. This is not the case. When you continue to do something despite negative consequences, it's an issue. Anyone can have an alcohol issue.

People who struggle with alcohol use are all different. They drink differently, have different issues, and lead different lives. People with alcohol use issues might:

* drink every day
* drink only on weekends
* binge drink every few months
* not drink at all (if they are in recovery)

Here are 2 examples of what an alcohol issue might look like. Remember, these are just examples and don't describe all people who use alcohol.

**Example 1: Bill**

Bill is the foreman on a construction site. He's married to Linda and they have 2 teenage daughters. After work, Bill always has 4 or 5 beers before dinner. Then, he drinks several more until he falls asleep watching TV. Bill has been having trouble at work. His boss has asked him if he has a drinking problem. When Bill and Linda go out, Bill always drinks heavily, even if he says he only plans to have 1 or 2 drinks.

Linda has told Bill that she doesn't like him drinking so much and that it embarrasses her when he gets drunk. Bill tells her that she doesn't know how to have fun. She's tried to talk to Bill about this, but she doesn't feel like she's getting through to him. When Linda tells Bill he needs help, he yells at her and throws things. Linda is scared of Bill when he's drinking. She often thinks about divorcing him. Bill used to drive the girls to school every morning. But about 2 months ago, Bill was charged with impaired driving and lost his driver's licence.

**Example 2: Carly**

Carly is in her first year of university. Carly and her boyfriend have been fighting a lot lately about her drinking. When they go out, Carly gets intoxicated and says and does things that embarrass both of them. Carly’s boyfriend said he needs time away from Carly to think about their relationship. Now instead of going out, Carly stays at home every weekend and drinks. She has missed a few classes because of her drinking. Her grades have gone down. Carly has spent most of the money her parents loaned her on alcohol. Now she has no money. Carly’s friends have sent her messages asking where she is. She hasn't called or texted her friends back.

Both Bill and Carly have an issue with alcohol. But they are different people with different challenges. They will both need different kinds of help.

**Is there a problem?**

About 80% of Albertans drink alcohol. Most people don't have alcohol use issues, but some people do. There is likely an issue if a person keeps drinking, even when it has negative effects on their life.

Addiction in the family

​​​​​​​​​​​Addiction is complicated. It affects everyone in the family and can affect them for the rest of their liv​es. These effects are different for every person and every family.

**How does an addiction develop?**

Developing an addiction can be a complex process. In the beginning, there is usually no problem. As time goes on, people may start to focus more on their using (like alcohol, drugs, or gambling) than they do in other parts of their lives. They may fall behind on bills, or forget about obligations they have. Many things affect the process, including the person’s culture, genetics, mental health, and their relationships with family and friends.

Addiction is a chronic disease that involves complex interactions between the brain, genetics, the environment, and someone’s life experiences. It can be treated. Approaches to prevent and treat addiction are generally as successful as those for other chronic diseases.

**How does addiction affect the family?**

When someone in the family has an addiction, the whole family usually develops ways to cope with the problems the addiction causes. Often, there is less communication: the family doesn’t talk about it or show how they feel. They may keep the addiction secret from other family and friends. Some family members take on some of the responsibilities the person with an addiction has stopped doing, or may provide financial support to the family member with an addiction.

While these ways to cope may help the family work more smoothly and get along better, they may also let the addiction continue. Unfortunately, family members may also use alcohol, drugs, or gambling themselves as a way of coping with the problems in their family. A person’s addiction usually has a negative impact on the family, which can lead to conflict and fighting between family members. Family members can become stressed or anxious when dealing with the person using, which can negatively affect their own health.

Family members often feel lonely, frustrated, afraid, angry, ashamed, or guilty. They may also feel that the situation is hopeless. It's important for them to know that the substance use or gambling is not their fault. Finding outside help from a support group counsellor, or religious leader often helps them cope with what is going on in their family.

**How does addiction affect children?**

Substance use and gambling may create an unstable family environment. Parents may not be able to parent as they should or provide basic necessities like proper food and clothing. Children may not be taught basic life skills. Children may feel insecure or unloved, and some may feel that the use is their fault. They may also begin to take on adult responsibilities that aren't appropriate for their age. These children are more likely to skip school, have anti-social behaviours (like being aggressive), or have other unhealthy behaviours (like an eating disorder).

Living with a person who has an addiction isn't easy for a child. Fortunately, most children are resilient and overcome most of these challenges to become strong, healthy adults. They build on their own and others' strengths.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the [24-hour Help Line](https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/findhealth/Service.aspx?id=1008399&serviceAtFacilityID=1047128) at 1-866-332-2322 (Alberta only).