NCADD FACT SHEET: ALCOHOLISM AND ALCOHOL-RELATED PROBLEMS

A SOBERING LOOK

- Alcohol, the most widely used psychoactive drug in the United States, has unique pharmacological effects on the person drinking it.¹

- Alcohol contributes to 100,000 deaths annually, making it the third leading cause of preventable mortality in the US, after tobacco and diet/activity patterns.²

- Among 9,484 deaths attributed to non-medical use of other drugs in 1996, 37% also involved alcohol.³

- More than 7% of the population ages 18 years and older—nearly 13.8 million Americans—have problems with drinking, including 8.1 million people who are alcoholic. Almost three times as many men (9.8 million) as women (3.9 million) are problem drinkers, and prevalence is highest for both sexes in the 18-to-29-years-old age group.⁴

- About 43% of US adults—76 million people—have been exposed to alcoholism in the family: they grew up with or married an alcoholic or a problem drinker or had a blood relative who was ever an alcoholic or problem drinker.⁵

- 62% of high school seniors report that they have been drunk; 31% say that have had five or more drinks in a row during the last two weeks.⁶

- People who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to develop alcoholism than those who begin at age 21.⁷ (For more information, see NCADDs, "Youth, Alcohol and Other Drugs Fact Sheet.)

- From 1985 to 1992, the economic costs of alcoholism and alcohol-related problems rose 42% to $148 billion. Two-thirds of the costs related to lost productivity, either due to alcohol-related illness (45.7%) or premature death (21.2%). Most of the remaining costs were in the form of health care expenditures to treat alcohol use disorders and the medical consequences of alcohol consumption (12.7%), property and administrative costs of alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes (9.2%), and various additional costs of alcohol-related crime (8.6%). Based on inflation and population growth, the estimated costs for 1995 total $166.5 billion.⁸

- Nearly one-fourth of all persons admitted to general hospitals have alcohol problems or are undiagnosed alcoholics being treated for the consequences of their drinking.⁹

- On average, untreated alcoholics incur general health care costs at least 100% higher than those of nonalcoholics, and this disparity may exist as long as 10 years before entry into treatment.¹⁰

- Based on victim reports, each year 183,000 (37%) rapes and sexual assaults involve alcohol use by the offender, as do just over 197,000 (15%) of robberies, about 661,000 (27%) aggravated assaults, and nearly 1.7 million (25%) simple assaults.¹¹

- Alcohol is typically found in the offender, victim or both in about half of all homicides and serious assaults, as well as in a high percentage of sex-related crimes, robberies, and incidents of domestic violence, and alcohol-related problems are disproportionately found among both juvenile and adult criminal offenders.¹²

- Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), which can occur when women drink during pregnancy, is the leading known environmental cause of mental retardation in the Western World.¹³

"GOVERNMENT WARNING: 1) According to the Surgeon General, women should not drink alcohol beverages during pregnancy because of the risk of birth defects. 2) Consumption of alcoholic beverages impairs your ability to drive a car or operate machinery and may cause other health problems."

— Warning label required by federal law on all alcoholic beverage containers, effective November 1990.
A PREVENTABLE, TREATABLE DISEASE

Prevention:

- Alcohol-related problems are not likely to be reduced by strategies involving single interventions directed solely at the individual; economic, political, social and environmental forces that work together to encourage and perpetuate these problems must also be addressed.\textsuperscript{14}

- Price increases on alcoholic beverages may be especially effective at reducing addictive consumption by younger, poorer, and less educated consumers, while information on the long-term health impacts of drinking may have a greater effect on addictive consumption by older, richer, and more educated consumers.\textsuperscript{15}

- School-based prevention programs that focus on social influences, such as peer resistance training or attempts to change perceived norms about alcohol, show more promise for changing alcohol use patterns than programs that emphasize the development of personal capabilities such as self-esteem, skill in making decisions and solving problems, and understanding how alcohol use can interfere with personal values and goals.\textsuperscript{16}

- Nations banning the advertising of distilled spirits, compared to nations with no bans, had approximately 16\% lower alcohol consumption; countries banning beer and wine ads had 11\% lower alcohol consumption than those prohibiting only the advertising of spirits. The reductions in motor vehicle fatality rates were 10\% and 23\% respectively.\textsuperscript{17}

Treatment:

- 3.1 million Americans—approximately 1.4\% of the population ages 12 and older—received treatment for alcoholism and alcohol-related problems in 1997; treatment peaked among people between the ages 26-34.\textsuperscript{18}

- A study examining the relative cost effectiveness of 33 specific treatment modalities for alcoholism suggested that more costly treatments are not necessarily more effective; of the six treatment modalities classified as having "good evidence of effect," all appear in the minimal-, low-, or medium-low-cost categories.\textsuperscript{19}

- Providing heavy drinkers who are not alcohol-dependent with self-help materials relating to alcoholism can, by itself, be an effective method of brief intervention.\textsuperscript{20}

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES

- Parenting practices, parental alcohol use, and peer drinking can influence a person's alcohol use and the associated problems that can stem from drinking.\textsuperscript{21}

- Content analyses of alcohol advertisements on television show that the ads link drinking with highly valued personal attributes such as socialibility, elegance, and physical attractiveness, and with desirable outcomes such as success, relaxation, romance, and adventure.\textsuperscript{22}

- Alcohol advertising may influence adolescents to be more favorably predisposed to drinking.\textsuperscript{23}

NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

On Health:

- The regular consumption of large amounts of alcohol (defined as more than three drinks per day) is undesirable from the standpoint of health for almost all people and drinking low-to-moderate amounts can be desirable or undesirable, depending on individual characteristics.\textsuperscript{24}

- Although there are fewer deaths from alcohol-related causes than from cancer or heart disease, alcohol-related deaths tend to occur at much younger ages.\textsuperscript{25}
Studies of suicide victims in the general population show that about 20% of such suicide victims are alcoholic.26

Heavy and chronic drinking can harm virtually every organ and system in the body.27

- is the single most important cause of illness and death from liver disease (alcoholic hepatitis and cirrhosis).28
- is associated with cardiovascular diseases such as cardiomyopathy, hypertension, arrhythmias, and stroke.29
- contributes to approximately 65% of all cases of pancreatitis.30
- depresses the immune system and results in a predisposition to infectious diseases, including respiratory infections, pneumonia, and tuberculosis.31
- increases risk for cancer, with an estimated 2-4% of all cancer cases thought to be caused either directly or indirectly by alcohol. The strongest link between alcohol and cancer involves cancers of the upper digestive tract, including the esophagus, the mouth, the pharynx, and the larynx. Less consistent data link alcohol consumption and cancers of the liver, breast and colon.32
- can lead to inadequate functioning of the testes and ovaries, resulting in hormonal deficiencies, sexual dysfunction and infertility.33
- is related to a higher rate of early menopause and a higher frequency of menstrual irregularities (duration, flow, or both) in women.34

Each year 4,000 to 12,000 babies are born with the physical signs and intellectual disabilities associated with FAS, and thousands more experience the somewhat lesser disabilities of fetal alcohol effects.35 (For more information, see NCADD's “Alcohol- and Other Drug-Related Birth Defects” fact sheet.)

An association has been established in both homosexual and heterosexual populations between alcohol use, drug use and behavior that increases the risk for contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, but underlying processes and mechanisms that explain this relationship have not been definitively identified.36

On the Family:

- Separated and divorced men and women were three times as likely as married men and women to say they had been married to an alcoholic or problem drinker.37
- An estimated 6.6 million children under the age of 18 years live in households with at least one alcoholic parent.38

Unintentional Deaths and Injuries:

- 36% of all traffic fatalities (the leading cause of accidental death) are alcohol-related39; alcoholics are nearly five times more likely than others to die in motor vehicle crashes.40
- One study showed that half of all boating fatalities had a blood alcohol content (BAC) of .04; BAC's of .10 or more were found in 31% of the fatalities.41
- Alcoholics are 16 times more likely than others to die in falls, and 10 times more likely to become fire or burn victims.42
- Estimates suggest that alcohol is associated with between 47% and 65% of adult drownings.43
- Up to 40% of industrial fatalities and 47% of industrial injuries can be linked to alcohol consumption and alcoholism.44 (For more information, see NCADD’s “Alcohol- and Other Drugs in the Workplace” fact sheet.)
CONSUMPTION PATTERNS & PRACTICES

- From 1996 to 1997, annual per capita consumption of alcohol in the US decreased 0.5% to 2.18 gallons; per capita consumption in 1997 is second only to 1995 in being the lowest in 35 years.45

- Two-thirds of the population drink, but 10% of all drinkers (those who drink most heavily) drink half of all alcohol consumed.46

- Moderate drinking is defined as no more than one drink a day for women and no more than two drinks per day for men. Twelve ounces of beer; 5 ounces of wine; or 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits (80 proof) counts as one drink.47

GENDER DIFFERENCES

- Study findings suggest that women metabolize alcohol less efficiently than men, a difference that leads to higher blood alcohol concentrations in women over a shorter period of time. This difference may make women more vulnerable than men to alcohol-induced liver damage.48 (For more information, see NCADD’s “Alcohol- and Other Drugs Among Women” fact sheet.)

- Alcohol-related problems more prominent for women than for men include serious reproductive and sexual dysfunctions; rapid development of dependence; more serious liver disease among those who are patients; victimization by others, particularly spouses; and sexual victimization.49

SOURCES


WHAT IS NCADD?

The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc. (NCADD) provides education, information, help and hope in the fight against the chronic, often fatal disease of alcoholism and other drug addictions. Founded in 1944, NCADD is a voluntary health organization with a nationwide network of Affiliates. NCADD advocates prevention, intervention, research and treatment and is dedicated to ridding the disease of its stigma and its sufferers from their denial and shame. For referral to a local Affiliate or to request a complete list of publications, call 800/NCA-CALL. Complete text of this fact sheet and additional information is available on NCADD's website (address below).

http://www.ncadd.org