7 Signs You Have a Drinking Problem

Think you know what an alcoholic looks like? Sometimes it's not that easy to tell.

April is Alcohol Awareness Month and, according to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, 18 million Americans or 8.5% of the population have some sort of alcohol-use disorder.

Are you–or is someone you know–one of them? Generally it's not just one behavior that is cause for concern, but several occurring at once. Here are some signs that you or someone you're close to may have an alcohol-related problem.

You vow to quit drinking, but don't
It's safe to say that at some point in their lives, almost anyone who drinks will have at least one embarrassing or unpleasant experience with alcohol. Whether it's a fight, becoming physically ill, hooking up with someone they regret, or just a crushing hangover, most people will vow to never do it again, and they don't. If you find yourself vowing to never do it again, but have the same experiences over and over, chances are you have a problem with alcohol. Same goes for a friend who seems to have an endless variety of unpleasant experiences while drinking–yet can't seem to alter their drinking patterns to prevent them.

You're chronically late
A person who is continually late or even a no-show, be it to social engagements, school, or work, may be abusing alcohol. "If it's a coworker you might find them wildly inconsistent or becoming more absent at work," says Simon A. Rego, PsyD, director of psychology training at Montefiore Medical Center/Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City. Of course, there are some people for whom this is just normal behavior. But if it represents a departure from previous behavior, or is getting worse, consider the possibility that the person may have an alcohol problem.

Your social life revolves around alcohol
While this might describe a large chunk of the college-attending population, it's still not a good sign. While there's nothing wrong with having drinks with friends or colleagues, it may be a problem if

you or someone you know only or mostly wants to socialize around drinks. This could take the form of frequent suggestions that alcohol be part of an evening's plans, as in "Let's meet up at the bar before dinner" or "Let's hook up at my place and have some drinks first." The person may not agree to plans that don't involve alcohol. "What's the fun in that?" they may say.

You hold your liquor better than in the past

Another sign of problem drinking is if a person needs more alcohol in order to appear drunk. For example, maybe you once felt drunk or slurred your words after two margaritas, but now find that only happens after you're had four. "This means they're building a tolerance," Rego says. Similarly, the person who gulps their drink in a few seconds as opposed to sipping it over the course of an evening or meal is also more likely to be the person with the alcohol problem.

You end up in risky situations

This means you put yourself or someone else in danger while drinking. The most obvious example is drunk driving, with more than 10,000 people in the U.S. killed in alcohol-related driving crashes in 2010. But being under the influence can also lead to cuts, bruises, or emergency room visits, as well as unsafe sex or using poor judgement in other ways. In extreme cases, abusing alcohol can mean job loss, financial ruin, criminal activity and even prison time.

Personality changes

If people say you have a vastly different personality when drinking than when sober, then it's a problem. People may become loud and boisterous, even violent when consuming alcohol, or they may withdraw entirely. Many times, alcohol is used to mask depression, anxiety, or stress but it can also cause these same emotional problems, says Rego. Look for extreme shifts in personality. "That's a sign," says Rego. "Now we're getting to a problematic level."

Memory loss while drinking

Black outs sounds dramatic, so it may be easier to dismiss them if you consider them "memory lapses." But they're actually the same thing. Blacking out is not passing out, Rego explains, a person who passes out is not conscious. A person who blacks out is conscious the entire time they're partying. "It's just in retrospect that there are gaping holes in what they remember," Rego says. "The next day you're talking to them and you mention something they did and they don't remember or they ask what went on last night or they seem to be fishing, 'Did I do anything or say anything inappropriate last night?'"

If you think you do have a problem with alcohol, support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous can help, or you can find professional counselors, therapists, or inpatient rehabilitation programs at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

Source: Health.com

To learn more about the signs and symptoms of alcohol use and abuse, please click here.