Ask The Expert

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Topic: Alcohol Awareness Month

What is it?

April is Alcohol Awareness Month, a good time to reflect on drinking patterns and the role that alcohol plays in our lives. Over time, excessive alcohol consumption can lead to the development of chronic disease and other serious issues that affect your quality of life, physical and mental health. Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD) affects millions of individuals worldwide. As we observe Alcohol Awareness Month, understanding the signs and symptoms of AUD is crucial. Here are key indicators to watch for:

Impaired Control Over Substance Use

- Consuming alcohol in larger amounts or for a longer duration than intended.
- Persistent desire to cut down or regulate alcohol use.
- Unsuccessful attempts to stop drinking.

Social Impairment

- Alcohol use interferes with fulfilling major obligations at work, school, or home.
- Continued alcohol use despite significant social or interpersonal problems.
- Reduction or discontinuation of recreational, social, or occupational activities due to alcohol use.

Risky Use

- Recurrent alcohol use in physically unsafe environments.
- Persistent alcohol use despite awareness of potential physical or psychological harm.

Pharmacologic Criteria

- Tolerance: Requiring higher alcohol doses to achieve the desired effect or experiencing reduced effects from the usual dose.
- Withdrawal: Signs and symptoms when alcohol levels decrease. Individuals seek alcohol to relieve withdrawal symptoms.

Why does it matter?

The CDC reports excessive alcohol use led to 178,000 deaths and 4 million years of potential life lost (YPLL) each year in the United States from 2020 - 2022. Excessive drinking was responsible for 1 in 5 deaths among adults aged 20-49 years. Alcohol abuse takes a toll on physical and mental health. Here are some effects:

Brain

Alcohol interferes with brain communication pathways, affecting mood, behavior, and cognitive function.

Heart

Long-term alcohol use can damage the heart, leading to cardiomyopathy, arrhythmias, and high blood pressure.

Liver

Heavy drinking harms the liver, causing conditions like fatty liver, alcoholic hepatitis, fibrosis, and cirrhosis.

Pancreas

Alcohol can lead to pancreatitis, impairing digestion and hormone production.

Cancer

Alcohol consumption is linked to head and neck, esophageal, liver, breast, and colorectal cancers.

Alcohol & Mental Health

Alcohol use disorder (AUD) often co-occurs with mental health conditions. Common co-occurring disorders include depression, anxiety, trauma-related disorders, and other substance use disorders. Recognizing the signs and seeking professional help is crucial. If you suspect someone is struggling with alcohol, consider these steps:

Learn the Signs

Neglecting responsibilities, binge drinking, denial or minimizing alcohol consumption, blackouts, and relationship problems.

Seek Resources

Reach out to organizations like the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) or SAMHSA's National Helpline.

Encourage Treatment

The severity of AUD and mental health conditions determines the level of care needed. Treatment can improve outcomes for both conditions.

What can I do?

Research suggests that prevention strategies are most effective when implemented from multiple areas such as parents, families, health care providers, community organizations, schools, and universities. Review the list below for next steps and additional information.

- The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's Rethinking Drinking has interactive resources to help you examine your drinking patterns.
- Share SAMHSA's National Helpline–1-800-662-HELP (4357) with individuals facing mental and/or substance use disorders and in need of immediate help.
- Educate yourself about Alcohol Use Disorder, its effects, and available resources.
- Be Supportive. Approach yourself or your loved one with compassion and understanding.
- Encourage Treatment. Seek professional help or attend support groups.
- Reaching out to your company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can be a valuable step when you or a loved one is facing mental health challenges. EAPs provide confidential support, counseling, and resources to help navigate personal and work-related issues. Whether it's stress, substance use, or emotional well-being, EAPs offer a compassionate and accessible avenue for seeking help. Remember, you're not alone–reach out and utilize this valuable resource.
- Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is a self-help group that provides support, encouragement, and a sense of community for individuals dealing with alcoholism. AA meetings are available worldwide, and they follow a 12-step program to promote recovery.

- Al-Anon Family Groups are specifically for family members and friends of individuals struggling with alcoholism. These support groups provide a safe space to share experiences, learn coping strategies, and find emotional support.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers a Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator, which helps you find treatment programs in your community. You can also reach out to their National Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP for confidential assistance.

References

Alcohol's Effects on the Body | National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)

One Year No Beer | Transform Your Relationship With Alcohol - One Year No Beer

Free Alcoholism Hotline, Support Groups & Resources - AlcoholAwareness.org

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) | National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)