

Overcoming Alcohol Addiction

How to Stop Drinking and Start Recovery



Overcoming an addiction to alcohol can be a long and bumpy road. At times, it may even feel impossible. But it's not. If you're ready to stop drinking and willing to get the support you need, you can recover from alcoholism and alcohol abuse—no matter how heavy your drinking or how powerless you feel. You don't have to wait until you hit rock bottom; you can make a change at any time. Whether you want to quit drinking altogether or cut down to healthier levels, these guidelines can help you get started on the road to recovery today.

How do I stop drinking?

Most people with alcohol problems do not decide to make a big change out of the blue or transform their drinking habits overnight. Recovery is usually a more gradual process. In the early stages of change, denial is a huge obstacle. Even after admitting you have a drinking problem, you may make excuses and drag your feet. It's important to acknowledge your ambivalence about stopping drinking. If you're not sure if you're ready to change or you're struggling with the decision, it can help to think about the costs and benefits of each choice.

Evaluating the costs and benefits of drinking

Make a table like the one below, weighing the costs and benefits of drinking to the costs and benefits of quitting.

Is drinking worth the cost?

Benefits of drinking

Is drinking worth the cost?

- It helps me forget about my problems.
- I have fun when I drink.
- It's my way of relaxing and unwinding after a stressful day.

Benefits of NOT drinking

- My relationships would probably improve.
- I'd feel better mentally and physically.
- I'd have more time and energy for the people and activities I care about.

Costs of drinking

- It has caused problems in my relationships.
- I feel depressed, anxious, and ashamed of myself.
- It gets in the way of my job performance and family responsibilities.

Costs of NOT drinking

- I'd have to find another way to deal with problems.
- I'd lose my drinking buddies.
- I would have to face the responsibilities I've been ignoring.

Set goals and prepare for change

Once you've made the decision to change, the next step is establishing clear drinking goals. The more specific, realistic, and clear your goals, the better.

Example #1: My drinking goal

- I will stop drinking alcohol.
- My quit date is _____.

Example #2: My drinking goal

- I will stop drinking on weekdays, starting as of _____.
- I will limit my Saturday and Sunday drinking to no more than three drinks per day or five drinks per weekend.
- After three months, I will cut back my weekend drinking even more to a maximum of two drinks per day and three drinks per weekend.

Do you want to stop drinking altogether or just cut back? If your goal is to reduce your drinking, decide which days you will drink alcohol and how many drinks you will allow yourself per day. Try to commit to at least two days each week when you won't drink at all.

When do you want to stop drinking or start drinking less? Tomorrow? In a week? Next month? Within six months? If you're trying to stop drinking, set a specific quit date.

How to accomplish your goals

After you've set your goals to either stop or cut back your drinking, write down some ideas on how you can help yourself accomplish these goals. For example:

Get rid of temptations. Remove all alcohol, barware, and other alcohol-related paraphernalia from your home and office.

Announce your goal. Let friends, family members, and co-workers know that you're trying to stop or cut back on drinking. If they drink, ask them to support your recovery by not doing so in front of you.

Be upfront about your new limits. Make it clear that drinking will not be allowed in your home and that you may not be able to attend events where alcohol is being served.

Avoid bad influences. Distance yourself from people who don't support your efforts to stop drinking or respect the limits you've set. This may mean giving up certain friends and social connections.

Learn from the past. Reflect on previous attempts to stop or reduce your drinking. What worked? What didn't? What can you do differently this time to avoid pitfalls?

Cutting back vs. quitting alcohol altogether

Whether or not you can successfully cut back on your drinking depends on the severity of your drinking problem. If you're an alcoholic—which, by definition, means you aren't able to control your drinking—it's best to try to stop drinking entirely. But if you're not ready to take that step, or if you don't have an alcohol abuse problem but want to cut back for personal or health reasons, the following tips can help:

Set a drinking goal. Choose a limit for how much you will drink. Make sure your limit is not more than one drink a day if you're a woman, or two drinks a day if you're a man—and try to schedule some alcohol-free days each week. Now write your drinking goal on a piece of paper. Put it where you can see it, such as on your refrigerator or bathroom mirror.

Keep a "diary" of your drinking. To help you reach your goal, keep a "diary" of your drinking. For example, write it down every time you have a drink during the week. Try to keep your diary for 3 or 4 weeks. This will show you how much you drink and when. You may be surprised. How different is your goal from the amount you drink now?

Watch it at home. Try to limit or remove alcohol from your home. It's much easier to avoid drinking if you don't keep temptations around.

Drink slowly. When you drink, sip your drink slowly. Take a break of 30 minutes or one hour between drinks—or drink soda, water, or juice after each alcoholic drink. Drinking on an empty stomach is never a good idea, so make sure you eat food when you drink.

Take breaks from alcohol. Pick a day or two each week when you will not drink at all. Then, try to stop drinking for one week. Think about how you feel physically and emotionally on these days. When you succeed and feel better, you may find it easier to cut down for good.

Source: *National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism*

Alcohol addiction treatment options

Some people are able to stop drinking on their own or with the help of a 12-step program or other support group, while others need medical supervision in order to withdraw from alcohol safely and comfortably. Which option is best for you depends on how much you've been drinking, how long you've had a problem, the stability of your living situation, and other health issues you may have.

Examples of alcohol treatment programs

Residential treatment involves living at a treatment facility while undergoing intensive treatment during the day. Residential treatment normally lasts from 30-90 days.

Partial hospitalization is for people who require ongoing medical monitoring but have a stable living situation. These treatment programs usually meet at the hospital for 3-5 days a week, 4-6 hours per day.

Intensive outpatient programs (IOP) focus on relapse prevention and can often be scheduled around work or school.

Therapy (Individual, Group, or Family) can help you identify the root causes of your alcohol use, repair your relationships, and learn healthier coping skills.

Tips for finding the best addiction treatment

There's no magic bullet or single treatment that works for everyone. Everyone's needs are different, so it's important that you find a program that feels right to you. Any alcohol addiction treatment program should be customized to your unique problems and situation.

Treatment doesn't have to be limited to doctors and psychologists. Many clergy members, social workers, and counselors also offer addiction treatment services.

Treatment should address more than just your alcohol abuse. Addiction affects your whole life, including your relationships, career, health, and psychological well-being.

Treatment success depends on examining the way alcohol abuse has impacted you and developing a new way of living.

Commitment and follow-through are key. Recovering from alcohol addiction or heavy drinking is not a quick and easy process. In general, the longer and more intense the alcohol use, the longer and more intense the treatment you'll need. But regardless of the treatment program's length in weeks or months, long-term follow-up care is crucial to your recovery.

Get treatment for other medical or mental health issues. People often abuse alcohol to ease the symptoms of an undiagnosed mental health problem, such as depression or anxiety. As you seek help for alcohol addiction, it's also important to get treatment for any other psychological issues you're experiencing. Your best chance of recovery is by getting combined mental health and addiction treatment from the same treatment provider or team.

Withdrawing from alcohol safely

When you drink heavily and frequently, your body becomes physically dependent on alcohol and goes through withdrawal if you suddenly stop drinking. The symptoms of alcohol withdrawal range from mild to severe, and include:

- Headache
- Shaking
- Sweating
- Nausea or vomiting
- Anxiety and restlessness
- Stomach cramps and diarrhea
- Trouble sleeping or concentrating
- Elevated heart rate and blood pressure

Alcohol withdrawal symptoms usually start within hours after you stop drinking, peak in a day or two, and improve within five days. But in some alcoholics, withdrawal is not just unpleasant—it can be life threatening.

If you're a long-term, heavy drinker, you may need medically supervised detoxification. Detox can be done on an outpatient basis or in a hospital or alcohol treatment facility, where you may be prescribed medication to prevent medical complications and relieve withdrawal symptoms. Talk to your doctor or an addiction specialist to learn more.

Seek emergency medical help if you experience any of the following withdrawal symptoms:

- severe vomiting
- confusion and disorientation

- fever
- hallucinations
- extreme agitation
- seizures or convulsions

The symptoms listed above may be a sign of a severe form of alcohol withdrawal called delirium tremens, or DTs. This rare, emergency condition causes dangerous changes in the way your brain regulates your circulation and breathing, so it's important to get to the hospital right away.

Get support

Whether you choose to tackle your alcohol addiction by going to rehab, getting therapy, or taking a self-directed treatment approach, support is essential. Don't try to go it alone. Recovering from alcohol addiction or abuse is much easier when you have people you can lean on for encouragement, comfort, and guidance.

Support can come from family members, friends, counselors, other recovering alcoholics, your healthcare providers, and people from your faith community.

Lean on close friends and family - Having the support of friends and family members is an invaluable asset in recovery. If you're reluctant to turn to your loved ones because you've let them down before, consider going to couples counseling or family therapy.

Build a sober social network - If your previous social life revolved around alcohol, you may need to make some new connections. It's important to have sober friends who will support your recovery. Try taking a class, joining a church or a civic group, [volunteering](#), or attending events in your community.

Make meetings a priority - Join a recovery support group and attend meetings regularly. Spending time with people who understand exactly what you're going through can be very healing. You can also benefit from the shared experiences of the group members and learn what others have done to stay sober.

Find new meaning in life

While getting sober is an important first step, it is only the beginning of your recovery from alcohol addiction or heavy drinking. Rehab or professional treatment can get you started on the road to recovery, but to stay alcohol-free for the long term, you'll need to build a new, meaningful life where drinking no longer has a place.

Five steps to a sober lifestyle

1. **Take care of yourself.** To prevent mood swings and combat cravings, concentrate on [eating right](#) and getting plenty of sleep. [Exercise](#) is also key: it releases endorphins, relieves stress, and promotes emotional well-being.
2. **Build your support network.** Surround yourself with positive influences and people who make you feel good about yourself. The more you're invested in other people and your community, the more you have to lose—which will help you stay motivated and on the recovery track.
3. **Develop new activities and interests.** Find new hobbies, volunteer activities, or work that gives you a sense of meaning and purpose. When you're doing things you find fulfilling, you'll feel better about yourself and drinking will hold less appeal.
4. **Continue treatment.** Your chances of staying sober improve if you are participating in a support group like Alcoholics Anonymous, have a sponsor, or are involved in therapy or an outpatient treatment program.
5. **Deal with stress in a healthy way.** Alcohol abuse is often a misguided attempt to manage stress. Find healthier ways to keep your stress level in check, such as exercising, meditating, or practicing breathing exercises or other relaxation techniques.

Plan for triggers and cravings

Cravings for alcohol can be intense, particularly in the first six months after you quit drinking. Good alcohol treatment prepares you for these challenges, helping you develop new coping skills to deal with stressful situations, alcohol cravings, and social pressure to drink.

Avoiding drinking triggers

Avoid the things that trigger your urge to drink. If certain people, places, or activities trigger a craving for alcohol, try to avoid them. This may mean making major changes to your social life, such as finding new things to do with your old drinking buddies—or even giving up those friends and [finding new ones](#).

Practice saying “no” to alcohol in social situations. No matter how much you try to avoid alcohol, there will probably be times where you're offered a drink. Prepare ahead for how you'll respond, with a firm, yet polite, “no thanks.”

Managing alcohol cravings

When you're struggling with alcohol cravings, try these strategies:

Talk to someone you trust: your sponsor, a supportive family member or friend, or someone from your faith community.

Distract yourself until the urge passes. Go for a walk, listen to music, do some housecleaning, run an errand, or tackle a quick task.

Remind yourself of your reasons for not drinking. When you're craving alcohol, there's a tendency to remember the positive effects of drinking and forget the negatives. Remind yourself of the adverse long-term effects of heavy drinking and how it won't really make you feel better, even in the short term.

Accept the urge and ride it out, instead of trying to fight it. This is known as "urge surfing." Think of your craving as an ocean wave that will soon crest, break, and dissipate. When you ride out the craving, without trying to battle, judge, or ignore it, you'll see that it passes more quickly than you'd think.

The three basic steps of urge surfing:

1. **Assess how you're experiencing the craving.** Sit in a comfortable chair with your feet flat on the floor and your hands in a relaxed position. Take a few deep breaths and focus your attention inward. Allow your attention to wander through your body. Notice the part of your body where you're experiencing the craving and what the sensations are like. Tell yourself what it feels like. For example, "My craving is in my mouth and nose and in my stomach."
2. **Focus on one area where you're experiencing the urge.** How do the sensations in that area feel. For example, perhaps you feel hot, cold, tingly, or numb? Are your muscles tense or relaxed? How large an area is involved? Describe the sensations to yourself and any changes that occur. "My mouth feels dry and parched. There is tension in my lips and tongue. I keep swallowing. As I exhale, I can imagine the smell and tingle of a drink."
3. **Repeat on each part of your body that's experiencing the craving.** What changes occur in the sensations? Notice how the urge comes and goes. You'll likely notice that after a few minutes the craving has gone. The purpose of urge surfing is not to make cravings disappear, but to experience them in a new way. However, with practice, you'll learn how to ride your cravings out until they go away naturally.

Handling setbacks in your recovery

Alcohol recovery is a process—one that often involves setbacks. Don't give up if you relapse or slip. A drinking relapse doesn't mean you're a failure or that you'll never be able to reach your goal. Each drinking relapse is an opportunity to learn and recommit to sobriety, so

you'll be less likely to relapse in the future.

What to do if you slip:

- Get rid of the alcohol and get away from the setting where you lapsed
- Remind yourself that one drink or a brief lapse doesn't have to turn into a full-blown relapse
- Don't let feelings of guilt or shame keep you from getting back on track
- Call your sponsor, counselor, or a supportive friend right away for help

How to help someone stop drinking

Alcohol abuse and addiction doesn't just affect the person drinking—it affects their families and loved ones, too. Watching a family member struggle with a drinking problem can be as heartbreakingly painful as it is frustrating. But while you can't do the hard work of overcoming addiction for your loved one, your love and support can play a crucial part in their long-term recovery.

Talk to the person about their drinking. Express your concerns in a caring way and encourage your friend or family member to get help. Try to remain neutral and don't argue, lecture, accuse, or threaten.

Learn all you can about addiction. Research the kinds of treatment that are available and discuss these options with your friend or family member.

Take action. Consider staging a family meeting or an intervention, but don't put yourself in a dangerous situation. Offer your support along each step of the recovery journey.

Don't make excuses for your loved one's behavior. The person with the drinking problem needs to take responsibility for their actions. Don't lie or cover things up to protect someone from the consequences of their drinking.

Don't blame yourself. You aren't to blame for your loved one's drinking problem and you can't make them change.

Take care of yourself. You don't need to face this alone. Turn to trusted friends, a support group, or your own therapist to help you cope. It's also important not to neglect your own needs. Schedule time into your day for relaxing and doing things you enjoy.

Where to turn for help

Most of these organizations have worldwide chapters:

HelpGuide

[Secular Organizations for Sobriety](#) - SOS is a similar organization to AA but without the religious affiliation. (Secular Organizations for Sobriety)

[Women for Sobriety](#) - Organization dedicated to helping women overcome addictions. (Women for Sobriety, Inc.)

[Alcoholics Anonymous](#) - Learn more about the 12 steps and find a support meeting in your area. (Alcoholics Anonymous)

[SMART Recovery](#) - Self-Management and Recovery Training (SMART) is a program that aims to achieve abstinence through self-directed change. (SMART Recovery)

[Al-Anon and Alateen](#) - Support groups for friends and families of problem drinkers. (al-anon.alateen.org)

Professional help for alcohol treatment and recovery

In the U.S.: [Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator](#) - SAMHSA

In the UK: [Find support services for alcohol addiction](#) - NHS

In Canada: [Addictions Treatment Helplines](#) - Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction

Recommended reading

[Overcoming Addiction](#) - Find an effective path toward recovery. (Harvard Medical School Special Health Report)

[Rethinking Drinking](#) - Tools to help you check your drinking pattern, identify signs of a problem, and cut back. (National Institutes of Health)

[How to Cut Down on Your Drinking](#) - Strategies for quitting or cutting back on your drinking. (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism)

[Older Adults and Alcohol: You Can Get Help](#) - Guide to alcohol abuse and recovery in older adults. (National Institute on Aging)

[What is Substance Abuse Treatment? A Booklet for Families](#) (PDF) - Learn about treatment options and what you can do. (SAMHSA)

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