

when a parent drinks too much alcohol...

what kids want to know



CHILDREN HAVE A LOT OF QUESTIONS AND FEARS when someone in their family drinks too much alcohol, especially a parent. When children don't have answers to their questions, they tend to come up with their own, which can be incorrect and scary!

When a family member has an alcohol problem, it can easily become a secret that nobody talks about. All children need some explanation and support, geared to their age, to help them understand drinking problems.

Each parent and child's first conversations about alcohol problems will be different. How you address the subject will depend on the child's age and ability to handle the information. But children can often understand more than you might think.

This brochure will help prepare you to take the first step in discussing alcohol problems with your child (or another child you care about).

Alcohol problems in the family are complex. This brochure is not intended to replace professional help. *Please get help from a professional.*

Questions kids have

Why does my mom or dad drink so much?

Lots of people drink alcohol and don't have problems. But this is not true for everyone. There are many possible reasons why someone may have a problem with alcohol, but sometimes the causes are not known. There are also different reasons why people begin drinking too much. At first, people may drink alcohol because it makes them feel better or more relaxed, or because it seems like fun. Some people may gradually begin to drink more, while for others heavy drinking may start more suddenly. In some cases, stress or other mental health problems may lead a person to drink more alcohol.

- Some people say they can't stop drinking. This is sometimes called an "addiction" to alcohol. When someone is addicted, he or she keeps drinking alcohol even though bad things start to happen. The person has a strong urge to drink, and it's very hard to stop.
- Imagine having some chewing gum in your mouth but not being allowed to chew it. You would really want to chew it, and it would be very hard not to. That's what it is like to fight an addiction.
- Alcohol problems can lead to other problems, such as problems with money, health or relationships. People with an alcohol problem may find it hard to stop drinking, even if they want to and even if these other problems begin to outweigh the good effects of drinking. Remember, not all alcohol use is a problem. It ranges from non-problem drinking to addiction.

What does it feel like to drink alcohol?

How does it feel to be drunk?

- Alcohol is a drug. It affects a person's body and how he or she feels and behaves.
- People who are drunk may have many different feelings. They may feel dizzy, silly, happy or free to act however they want. Or they may feel out of control, angry, violent, sad, tired or nauseous (feel like vomiting).
- After drinking a lot, people may have trouble remembering, talking, standing, walking or doing other tasks.
- People may also vomit (throw up), fall down, feel ill (have a "hangover") or black out (when they can't remember what happened).

Why am I so confused about how I feel?

Why do I worry so much?

- If someone in your family drinks too much alcohol, things at home might not feel calm or safe. The alcohol problem can make family relationships tense, which can cause arguments. When you are worrying about what is going on, it may be hard to concentrate at home and at school.
- The parent with the alcohol problem may say things that he or she doesn't mean. Your mom or dad may break promises. There may not be a regular schedule at home (for example, meals may not be on time). Kids may feel unhappy, or may be embarrassed to bring friends home.
- All this stress can cause confusing feelings. You may feel:
 - worried or scared
 - angry
 - sad
 - embarrassed
 - guilty or ashamed
 - confused
 - unloved
 - hate
 - sorry for the parent who drinks too much.

All these feelings are normal. Even scary feelings are OK.

Why is the alcohol problem a secret?

- People often don't want to let others know about their alcohol problem. They may worry that others will think badly of them and treat them differently. This is sometimes called "stigma" or "discrimination."
- Sometimes a person may not want to admit that he or she has an alcohol problem (for example, how much he or she is drinking or how it is affecting others).
- Drinking is often seen as something that people should be able to control, or to stop if they want to. People may worry that others would see them as "weak" if they admitted having an alcohol problem.

- People may also worry that if they admit they have a problem, it may lead to other problems (for example, that it may make them lose their job, scare family members or make others think they are a bad parent). Sometimes kids think that if they talk about their mom or dad's drinking problem, they will get their parent in trouble. They may also worry about getting in trouble themselves.
- Kids might feel that their family is different from others (for example, there may be a lot of arguing, the house may be a mess or the parent may often be sleeping on the couch). A child might be embarrassed by what is going on at home, and not want anyone to know about it.

Can my mom or dad stop drinking so much?

Can people get better?

- Yes. The good news is that people with alcohol problems can get better.
- Some people manage to drink less. Others are able to stop drinking alcohol completely.
- It can be really hard to stop drinking. A person may take a long time to change. Or they might change for a while, but then have a day or week when they start drinking again. This is called a "relapse," and it is often part of getting better. It doesn't always mean the person won't ever stop.
- There are different kinds of treatment for alcohol problems. Sometimes medicine may help. Sometimes treatment for mental health problems (like stress or depression) may help, because these problems may be contributing to the drinking problem. Some people may need a combination of treatments.
- The person may need to make other changes to help him or her stop drinking. For example, it can help if the person finds new hobbies, other things to do in his or her spare time (for example, sports, arts or crafts), and perhaps even new friends. The person may also need a doctor's help to take care of himself or herself.

Is there anything I can do to make my mom or dad better?

- Many kids worry about the parent with the alcohol problem. Family support is really important for people with a drinking problem, but it is the adults who are responsible for being the "helpers," not the kids.
- Sometimes the parent may blame others for his or her drinking. But kids are not the cause of their parent's drinking problem, no matter what is going on at home. The child can't control or cure the problem.
- Even though kids can't fix the alcohol problem, sometimes it can help your parent just to know that you are there. It is important for you to know about your mom or dad's problem and to know that, with treatment, they can get better.

Why do people drink so much when they know it will hurt them or others?

When people have an alcohol problem, they may lie and say things they don't mean, which can really hurt people's feelings. People may not admit the bad things that are happening in their lives (either to themselves or to others) because of their drinking. When someone is drunk, his or her judgment is off, or "impaired." The person may do dangerous things, such as driving or getting into fights.

- People with a drinking problem believe alcohol will help them feel better or forget about their other problems.
- People who drink too much usually only focus on what is happening right now. They do not think about what may happen later or in the long term. They may not be able to understand what is really going on in their lives.
- People who have been drinking too much for a long time may drink to avoid feeling ill. They may feel ill if they stop drinking or drink less, and this feels worse in the short term.

Whom can I talk to? Where can I go to for help? What do I do if I don't feel safe?

When kids have a parent with an alcohol problem, they may go through times when they feel angry, sad or scared. They may be afraid to talk about their feelings. Sometimes they just may not know what to do.

- It's important for kids to find people they can talk to. Kids can talk to adults they trust, such as the other parent or a grandparent, teacher, counsellor or family doctor. Kids can write down questions or worries to help them think more clearly, or so they can share them with a trusted adult.
- Kids can also talk to other kids they trust. Sometimes there's nothing like a good friend.
- If the child is worried and has no one to talk to, he or she can call Kids Help Phone at 1 800 668-6868 to talk to an adult who can help. If there is an emergency, the child can call 911.
- Sometimes children feel better if they make an action plan with their parent (or another trusted adult). This helps them decide what to do when they are scared.
- Actions plans can include:
 - making a list of signs that tell the child that the parent is doing well or not doing well
 - having the name and number of an adult the child can call.

When I grow up, will I have an alcohol problem too?

- Most adults drink responsibly and don't develop alcohol problems.
- It's natural to worry about this. Some scientists think that kids may be more likely to have an alcohol problem if a parent does. But this is not certain, and most kids will not follow in their parent's footsteps and have a drinking problem.
- Kids are able to make different choices. It helps if kids know the risks. They can get support to help them make different choices than their parent did.

What can I do so that I don't ever have an alcohol problem?

There are a lot of things kids can do. Joining clubs, playing sports and hanging out with friends are all great ideas. So is spending time with other adults who don't have problems with alcohol (for example, sports coaches, teachers and other grown-up relatives).

- It's important for kids to find something they enjoy and to spend a lot of time doing it. It's good to spend time with other kids who like to play sports and do fun and healthy things (for example, ride bikes, play in the playground, do arts and crafts, and play on the computer). These are all great ways to cope with stress, sadness, and ups and downs.
- Kids should also find things they like to do alone, for when they can't leave the house or find someone to play with. For example, they can read, write stories, play music or watch TV. They can also talk to a friend on the phone.
- If kids have their own dreams and goals, they are less likely to have an alcohol problem. Adults can help kids work toward goals. It's important for kids to have a relationship with at least one caring adult.
- When things in the family are going well, it's a good idea for kids to join in family celebrations and rituals. These can be small things, like eating dinner together, watching a TV show together or celebrating birthdays and holidays together in a special way. This is important for kids, even when not everyone in the family is there.

Need more help?

If you want more information about alcohol problems and how they affect children and families, speak to your family doctor or call the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) at 1 800 463-6273, or 416 595-6111 in Toronto.

Help is also available at:

www.thereishelp.org

This website helps people understand mental health and addiction problems, treatments and healthy living strategies.

Also available from CAMH:



Wishes and Worries: A Story to Help Children Understand a Parent Who Drinks Too Much Alcohol (product code P5599)
Written for children from 5 to 10 years old, this interactive resource is for parents, extended

family, teachers and addiction and mental health professionals who want to address the impact of an alcohol problem on children's lives.



Take Action: Alcohol, Other Drugs Problems and Your Family (product code PH044)

This booklet for families is divided into two sections. The first discusses how to prevent problems with alcohol and other drugs. The second suggests ways of dealing with an existing alcohol or other drug problem.

For more information on addiction and mental health issues, or to download a copy of this brochure, please visit our website:

www.camh.ca

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