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What is Alcohol Treatment and How Does It Work?

Alcoholism can be treated similarly to other chronic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes and asthma in adults. There are a variety of treatment options, depending on the individual's particular situation and needs.

- Clinical studies have repeatedly found that treatment substantially reduces drinking among alcoholics.
- Many alcoholics, like individuals with other illnesses, need to use a variety of services to treat their illnesses.
- Even if people with alcoholism relapse during their treatment, their lives, their families, their workplace and society at large benefit for as long as they remain abstinent.
- Largely due to the success of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and other voluntary recovery organizations, some alcoholics recover without medical treatment.
- Many individuals with drinking problems are required to participate in a self-help group as a substitute for medical treatment. For example, people who are arrested for driving while intoxicated are routinely referred to AA by the judicial system when a brief medical intervention in a doctor's office might be more appropriate and help stop a problem drinker from developing alcoholism.

There Are Many Steps in Alcohol Treatment

- Detoxification helps individuals through withdrawal and is often the first step toward treatment. Persons with severe dependence on alcohol may need medication and close medical management during detoxification, sometimes requiring brief hospitalization.
- Social skills training, motivational enhancement, cognitive therapy, marriage and family counseling, aversion therapy and relaxation training are among the many psychological therapies used to treat people with alcoholism.
- Many psychological therapies have been used successfully, though no single therapy has proven superior to others in achieving long-term recovery.
- People with alcoholism may have a better chance of achieving long-term recovery if they receive appropriate services for their other problems, which can include drug addiction, depression, unemployment and domestic violence.
- Outpatient treatment works best for people with strong social support systems and without other medical or mental health

problems. People with other disorders in addition to alcoholism and/or a lack of strong social support may do better if they are treated in a hospital.

New Medications Target Brain Chemistry

- Naltrexone was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 1995 to prevent relapse in individuals who are undergoing psychological therapy; it works by blocking the "high" that people with alcoholism seek when they drink.
- Acamprosate, a drug that has been available in Europe for more than 10 years, is now under FDA review. It targets a different pathway in the brain than naltrexone and may have fewer side effects.
- Disulfiram (Antabuse), the only medication previously approved to treat alcoholism, makes patients violently sick when they drink alcohol.

More People Need Alcoholism Treatment Than Get It

- Although two to three million Americans receive clinical treatment for alcoholism fewer than 25% of those who need treatment get it in a given year.
- Access to treatment is most limited for adolescents and older Americans.

Relapse Rates for Alcoholism, Other Chronic Illnesses Comparable

- Forty to sixty percent of patients treated for addiction to alcohol and/or other drugs remain abstinent after a year; another 15 percent resume drinking though not to the point where they become dependent again.
- During the course of a year, 30 percent of diabetics and 40 percent of patients with high blood pressure or asthma will suffer a reoccurrence of their symptoms.

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