

A LINE ON LIFE

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Social Drinker or Alcoholic? *

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There are about 9-10 million alcoholics in the United States. Although the incidence of alcoholism is increasing in women, there are still about four times as many male alcoholics as female. Alcoholism is related to a substantial proportion of murders and suicides. The majority of traffic deaths are related to alcohol abuse.

To add to this, *billions* of dollars are spent annually in the United States to deal with alcoholism. This includes losses to industry (lost work time or inefficiency) of over \$9 billion, the cost of automobile accidents of over \$6 billion and a health care bill of over \$8 billion. Since the majority of Americans consume some type of alcohol, how can you tell if you or your friends are *alcoholics* or merely *social drinkers*?

One factor is *how* you drink. Alcoholics drink differently than social drinkers. One psychological study (Sobell, Schaefer and Mills, 1972) compared 23 social drinkers with 25 alcoholics. They were put in an experimental bar setting, where they could consume up to 16 ounces (one pint) of alcohol. None of the alcoholics had consumed any alcohol within the past three weeks. Subjects were observed in this bar setting, where they could order drinks for up to four hours.

Several differences were observed. First, alcoholics *drank more than twice as much* (averaging 15.25 ounces) as the social drinkers (6.67 ounces). Second, alcoholics preferred *straight drinks* (54%). In contrast, social drinkers preferred mixed drinks (63%). Third, alcoholics tended to *gulp* or drink their alcohol quite rapidly. On the other hand, social drinkers took longer to finish their drinks. The results are summarized in the table below.

Alcoholics

1. Almost always drink more than 12 drinks in a 12-hour period.
2. Generally order straight drinks.
3. Take a large size sip, no matter what type of drink.
4. Drink much faster than social drinkers, sometimes three times as fast.

Social Drinkers

1. Very seldom drink more than 12 drinks in a 4-hour period.
2. Typically order mixed drinks.
3. Take a smaller size sip, no matter what type of drink.
4. Drink considerably slower than alcoholics.

Cultural factors also contribute to whether a person drinks socially or becomes an alcoholic. Alcoholism rates are lower in ethnic groups that emphasize the use of alcohol for religious or dining purposes, such as Jews and Italians. Even though these groups encourage drinking in social situations, they strongly *disapprove of drinking to excess*. In contrast, some ethnic groups, such as the Irish, have a higher rate of alcoholism. Typically they use drinking in a recreational way and are more likely to drink alone.

Most social drinkers never become alcoholics. However, a person might be classified as a "**pre-alcoholic**," if the frequency of drinking increases, the tolerance for alcohol increases, and alcohol produces a marked reduction in anxiety or other discomfort. (**Tolerance** means that the body is adapting to the use of alcohol, so more alcohol is required to produce the same effect.) Although having the traits of a "*pre-alcoholic*" does not guarantee becoming an alcoholic, it does indicate an increased probability.

Alcoholism does not happen overnight. The excessive reliance on alcohol develops gradually over a period of years. Certain symptoms show that the complications of excessive drinking are beginning to accumulate. **Blackouts** – losses of memory for certain time periods – start to occur. The person becomes *preoccupied* with drinking. He will start to hide his drinking, drink alone, and avoid discussing his drinking. He will drink more rapidly, typically gulping his drinks. He may experience unpleasant emotions about his drinking and behavior – depressions, guilt or extreme anxiety.

Whether you are an alcoholic or a social drinker, you should be aware that alcohol is a *depressant*. Long before it interferes with motor control, it *impairs a person's judgment*. If you drink – even if you are only a social drinker – **do not drive!**

* Adapted from information in Lahey and Ciminero's *Maladaptive Behavior: An Introduction to Abnormal Psychology*, Scott Foresman Publishers, 1980, pages 461-490.