

Choices about Alcohol

It is likely that, at some time in your college career—if not multiple times—you will be faced with choices about alcohol and what role you want it to play in your life. You may make those decisions based on a number of factors including: expectations about what alcohol will do to or for you, level of stress, desire to experiment, pressure by peers, religious and cultural reasons, and personal values, among other things. Regardless of the factors affecting your choices to drink, you would never consciously choose or intend for alcohol to become a problem for you. But the simple fact is that alcohol is an addictive drug that changes your brain chemistry in a way that **can** make you dependent on it. And, unfortunately, there is no formula available to predict who will develop a problem with alcohol and who will not, as there are an infinite number of genetic, biological, emotional, psychological, learning, and other possible variables that are at work. Additionally, developing a problem with alcohol has little to do with what kind of alcohol you drink or how long you have been drinking. So, you cannot easily nor accurately predict whether or not alcohol will become a problem for you. However, you can recognize the signs about what role alcohol is currently playing in your life, allowing you to make choices to lessen the risk that problems will develop or to get support if it is already causing problems in your life. Those signs occur on a continuum:

Non-Use

About 20% of college students choose not to drink at all, for a variety of reasons. If you do not drink at all you will obviously not be experiencing any direct effects from alcohol. However, you may be still be affected indirectly by other people's choices with alcohol, which can affect your own sense of safety and well-being.

Use

You drink responsibly every time and have never experienced negative consequences because of your drinking. You drink in moderation, when you choose to drink. However, you do not miss alcohol when it is not around and have many interests, activities, and friendships which do not include alcohol. You do not use alcohol to cope with stress. Your family and friends are not concerned about your alcohol use.

Occasional Misuse

You almost always drink within responsible limits but may have experienced occasional and short-lived negative consequences from alcohol, such as hangover or mild embarrassment about something you said or did. You are able to recognize when you have exceeded your own limits and return to responsible drinking with little effort. You may make these detours from your own limits because of peer pressure or a desire to experiment with alcohol but you easily recognize the consequences of your choices and are able to get back on track.

Abuse

You are increasingly, perhaps oftentimes, irresponsible about your alcohol use, leading to problems for yourself and others. Many of your interests, friendships, and activities involve the presence of alcohol. You find that your personality changes when you drink—you become much more animated, become aggressive, get irritable, or take risks that you normally would not take. You may dismiss or ignore these changes or consequences, believing that other people or circumstances are causing them or that the consequences themselves are irrelevant. However, the negative consequences you experience are becoming more significant, they keep occurring, and you continue to use despite these continuing problems—things like underage drinking citations, a DUI, academic decline or attendance problems, difficulty fulfilling major responsibilities at work or within your family, damaging effects on social relationships. You may be leaning on alcohol to help you open up socially, to cope with stress, or to blot out difficult feelings or experiences. You may “binge drink,” which is a common pattern among college students who abuse alcohol and which constitutes 5 or more drinks in a sitting for men and 4 or more drinks in a setting for women. The more times you have binged on alcohol, the more likely you have

experienced negative consequences. You may also abuse alcohol by getting intoxicated daily for several or many days in a row—sometimes called a “bender.” Regardless of your patterns of abusive drinking, there may be long periods of total abstinence or even moderate, responsible drinking between the periods of heavy drinking.

Dependence

Your use is out of control. You may have periods where you can abstain from alcohol, but when you do drink you cannot stop drinking or stick to limits that you set for yourself. You may have tried repeatedly to stop drinking but those attempts have failed. Life itself is losing its luster and you feel terrible about what is happening, yet may not believe alcohol is the problem. Your body needs to consume greater and greater amounts of alcohol to get the same effect you would have gotten in the past, due to increased tolerance. You may experience withdrawal when you do not drink—shaking, sweating, irritability, restlessness, vomiting or nausea, seizures, hallucinations. You may have cravings—strong urges or needs—to drink that may feel as strong as the need for food or water. You may be able to hide your dependency from others and function adequately in your roles as student, employee, friend, child, and so on. However, more likely, you may find that your life itself is out of control as it becomes centered more and more around alcohol and less and less on the healthy connections you have previously established.

You may recognize some of these signs in your life and find that you have questions or concerns about your use of alcohol. If so, you may want to contact the Counseling Center for an alcohol screening appointment. At an alcohol screening appointment you will further explore your use of alcohol, have a supportive conversation about your use, and discuss ways to address any concerns you may have.

Sources: “The Continuum of Alcohol Use-Dependency for Alcohol and Other Drugs.” PICADA, 1985.
“Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th edition.” American Psychiatric Association, 1994.
“Dying to Drink: Confronting Binge Drinking On College Campuses.” H. Wechsler and B. Wuethrich, Rodale Publishers, 2002.