

# Types of Alcoholism

## Behavioral Alcoholism

Some studies categorize alcoholics based on a combination of the nature of the addictive behavior, the age of the alcoholic, when they began drinking, and the degree of self-control, or lack thereof, expressed by the alcoholic. Here is one categorization:

**Young Adult** – Generally become alcoholic in their early twenties. Drink less frequently than other alcoholics, but when they do drink they tend to binge drink. This type of binge drinking behavior is more common among college students than it is among non-students. Young adult alcoholics are usually fairly functional in society with occasional lapses that people wonder about.

**Young Antisocial** – Generally become alcoholic while still in their teens. Tend to be manipulative or exploitive of other people, often violating their rights and often end up in trouble with the law early in life, setting a pattern that tends to repeat throughout their life.

**Functional** – These are generally working adults in their middle years, who manage to maintain reasonably stable relationships and work lives. They generally don't drink every day. They behave more like social drinkers, drinking three or four times per week. However, when they do drink, they usually drink to at least early levels of intoxication, often drinking five, six or more drinks.

**Familial** – These alcoholics tend to begin drinking in their mid teens, learning to drink from their relatives, who often can be alcoholics themselves. It often takes 15 to 20 years before they develop true physiological addiction.

**Chronic** – This is the type most people think of when they think of what an alcoholic is like, although these represent only one in ten alcoholics. Chronic alcoholics are usually men with poor relationship and work histories, sometimes ending up homeless for some part of their life.

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## Physiological Alcoholism

Another grouping of types of alcoholism comes from seminal work by E. M. Jellinek and is based on the nature of the physiological processes involved.

**Alpha Alcoholism** – This is the earliest stage of alcoholism, manifesting as a purely psychological dependence on alcohol to relieve pain. While these “problem” drinkers often create problems for themselves and those around them by their drinking behavior, their addiction is not physical.

It is believed that alpha alcoholics are still in control of their drinking behavior and can stop drinking if they really wanted to, without physical withdrawal symptoms. In practice, however, alpha alcoholics seldom just quit, unless they have some other mechanism for addressing their psychological or physical pain that is at the source of their drinking.

**Beta Alcoholism** – These are heavy drinkers that drink nearly every day and have begun to have physical symptoms as a result of their drinking, such as cirrhosis of the liver or nerve damage. Like alpha alcoholics, beta alcoholics do not have a physical alcohol addiction. They can also quit drinking without withdrawal symptoms.

**Gamma Alcoholism** – Gamma alcoholics evidence loss of control in their drinking behavior. They have a physical dependence on alcohol and do suffer physical withdrawal symptoms when they stop drinking.

**Delta Alcoholism** – Like the gamma alcoholic, the delta alcoholic has a physical dependence on alcohol and suffers physical withdrawal. However, rather than evidencing a loss of control when they drink, delta alcoholics are unable to stop themselves from taking a drink if it is available.

**Epsilon (or Zeta) Alcoholism** – is the final stage of alcoholism where the alcoholic has a continual, insatiable craving for alcohol, continually drinking to excess. Physical degeneration is accelerated with death often the only way that, without intervention, the alcoholic can or will stop drinking.

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## Dry Drunk

The term dry drunk is sometimes used to describe an alcoholic that has quit drinking but is still a pain to be around. It is sometimes used pejoratively, but it does identify a particular alcoholic state.

When an alcoholic stops drinking, often through sheer will power, but still demonstrates the same behaviors that were associated with their drinking, such as abuse, anger, violence or dishonesty, the term dry drunk is often used.

Sometimes stopping drinking will exacerbate negative behavior. If the alcoholic was drinking to cover up physical or psychological pain, they were indulging in a form of self-medication. Now that the alcohol is no longer covering up the pain, the alcoholic is dealing with the pain, from moment to moment, with no relief. It is no wonder they may be somewhat irritable – and extremely irritating to those around them. Have patience. At least they are not drinking.

## What does it mean to me?

While some types of alcoholics are more functional than others, any type of alcoholism carries severe health risks. If you care about them, it probably matters little which kind of alcoholic you live with. And in practice, it is often difficult to categorize a particular alcoholic as sometimes they evidence features of more than one type. The biggest risk is that some types of alcoholism make it easier for both you and the alcoholic to be in denial about what is going on.

In my opinion, for those living with an alcoholic, knowing the precise types of alcoholism is seldom useful. I believe that the key factor is whether or not your loved one's drinking behavior is causing pain or problems for you or your family. If it is, then the type of alcoholism is of little import. What is important is the recognition that you have a problem and the steps you take to address that problem.

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