

## Impact of Alcoholism on Children

Many of us are affected by alcoholism, but people with alcoholic parents especially need to understand the effects of alcohol dependence. Understanding how this disease has affected their upbringing can help many adult children of alcoholics gain control over their own lives.

### "My parents were alcoholics"

- **Guilt.** The child may see him/herself as the main cause of the parent's drinking.
- **Anxiety.** The child may worry constantly about the situation at home.
- **Embarrassment.** Parents may give the child the message that there is a terrible secret at home. The ashamed child does not invite friends home and is afraid to ask anyone for help.
- **Inability to have close relationships.** Because the child has been disappointed by the drinking parent many times, he or she often does not trust others.
- **Confusion.** The alcoholic parent will change suddenly from being loving to angry, regardless of the child's behavior. Also, a regular daily schedule, which is very important for a child, may not exist because bedtimes and mealtimes are constantly changing.
- **Anger.** The child feels anger at the alcoholic parent for drinking and may be angry at the non-alcoholic parent for lack of support and protection.
- **Depression.** The child feels lonely and helpless to change the situation.

20% grow up  
with an alcoholic

## Resources

### Al-Anon

1-888-4AL-ANON

[www.al-anon.alateen.org](http://www.al-anon.alateen.org)

### Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs Program

G57 Suites on Maple East

724-357-1265

[ATOD-OASIS@iup.edu](mailto:ATOD-OASIS@iup.edu)

[www.iup.edu/atod](http://www.iup.edu/atod)

### Counseling Center

G31 Suites on Maple East

724-357-2621

[www.iup.edu/counselingcenter](http://www.iup.edu/counselingcenter)

### The Open Door Counseling & Crisis

The Atrium—2nd Floor

665 Philadelphia St.

Indiana, PA

724-465-4605

24/7 Crisis Intervention:

1-877-333-2470

[www.theopendoor.org](http://www.theopendoor.org)

# Alcoholism in the Family



## Are you at risk?

Brought to you by:  
Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs Program  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania



If you are among the millions of people in this country who have a parent, grandparent, or other close relative with alcoholism, you may have wondered what your family's history of alcoholism means for you.

Are problems with alcohol a part of your future? Is your risk for becoming an alcoholic greater than for people who do not have a family history of alcoholism? If so, what can you do to lower your risk?

Many scientific studies, including research conducted among twins and children of alcoholics, have shown that genetic facts influence alcoholism. These findings show that **children of alcoholics are about four times more likely than the general population to develop alcohol problems.** Children of alcoholics also have a higher risk for many other behavioral and emotional problems. But alcoholism is not determined only by the genes you inherit from your parents. In fact, **more than one-half of all children of alcoholics do not become alcoholic.** Research shows that many factors influence your risk of developing alcoholism. Some factors raise the risk while others lower it.



## What is Alcoholism?

Alcoholism, or alcohol dependence, is a disease that includes four symptoms:

- **Craving**—A strong need or urge to drink
- **Loss of control**—not being able to stop drinking once drinking has begun
- **Physical dependence**—withdrawal symptoms, such as upset stomach, sweating, shakiness and anxiety after stopping drinking
- **Tolerance**—the need to drink greater amounts of alcohol to get the same effect

Genes are not the only things children inherit from their parents. How parents act and how they treat each other and their children has an influence on children growing up in the family. These aspects of family life also affect the risk for alcoholism.

Researchers believe a person's risk increases if he or she is in a family with the following difficulties:

- An alcoholic parent is depressed or has other psychological problems
- Both parents abuse alcohol and other drugs
- The parents' alcohol abuse is severe
- Conflicts lead to aggression and violence in the family

## Genes ≠ Destiny

The good news is that many children of alcoholics from even the most troubled families do not develop drinking problems. Just because alcoholism tends to run in families does not mean that a child of an alcoholic parent will automatically become an alcoholic too. The risk is higher but it does not have to happen.

***If you are worried that your family's history of alcohol problems or your troubled family life puts you at risk for becoming an alcoholic, here is some advice to help you:***

- **Avoid underage drinking.** First, underage drinking is illegal. Second, research shows that the risk for alcoholism is higher among people who begin to drink at an early age, perhaps as a result of both environmental and genetic factors.
- **Drink moderately as an adult.** Even if they do not have a family history of alcoholism, adults who choose to drink alcohol should do so in moderation. No more than one drink a day for most women and no more than two drinks a day for most men. (Guidelines from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
- **Talk to a health care professional.** Discuss your concerns with a doctor, nurse, nurse practitioner, or other health care providers. They can recommend groups or organizations that could help you avoid alcohol problems. If you are an adult who already has begun to drink, a health care professional can assess your drinking habits to see if you need to cut back on your drinking and advise you about how to do that.