Some people enjoy an occasional glass of wine with dinner. Others might grab a beer while watching a football game. Most people drink alcohol moderately, within their limits. Others overdo it occasionally. But some people find they can’t control their drinking. How do you know when drinking is becoming a problem? And what can you do if it is?

About 18 million Americans have an alcohol use disorder. Drinking too much alcohol raises your risk of injury and accidents, disease, and other health problems. Heavy drinking is one of the leading causes of preventable deaths in this country, contributing to nearly 88,000 deaths each year.

How much is too much? Men shouldn’t have more than 14 drinks per week and 4 drinks on any single day. Women shouldn’t have more than 7 drinks per week and no more than 3 drinks on any day. But you might be surprised at what counts as a drink. A 5-ounce glass of table wine, a 12-ounce glass of regular beer, and 1½ ounces of hard liquor each contain the same amount of alcohol, and each counts as 1 drink. You may need to adjust the amount you drink depending on how alcohol affects you. Some people—such as pregnant women or people taking certain medications—shouldn’t drink alcohol at all.

“Addiction has 3 major problems: You lose your ability to feel good, you get more stressed, and you have a hard time making proper decisions,” says Dr. George Koob, director of the NIH National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. “That’s a recipe for disaster.”

Signs of an alcohol problem include drinking more, or more often than you intended, or making unsuccessful attempts to cut back or quit. People with alcohol problems often have trouble functioning at work, home, or school.

“'A good indicator is that something is out of whack. Is your personal life deteriorating because of your drinking? Are people starting to shun you? If you're feeling generally miserable, that's a warning sign,” Koob says.

“You don’t have to hit bottom. You’ll save yourself a lot of damage socially, professionally, and probably in your own body if you attend to an alcohol problem a lot earlier.”
Rethink That Drink

Drinking too much alcohol? Here are some tips to help cut back:

- Pace yourself. Sip slowly. Drink a glass of water after each alcoholic drink.
- Include food. Don’t drink on an empty stomach.
- Avoid triggers. If certain people, places, or activities tempt you to drink, try to avoid them.
- Seek healthy alternatives. Look for new hobbies, interests, or friendships to help fill your time and manage your stress.
- Track and control how much you drink. If offered a drink you don’t want, have a polite, convincing “no thanks” reply ready.

Alcohol Addiction Treatment

Studies show that most people with an alcohol use disorder can benefit from some form of treatment. If you or someone you care about may have an alcohol problem, help is available. The first step is to talk to a primary care doctor. In some cases, a brief intervention, or an honest conversation about drinking habits and risks, is all the person needs. If the problem is more serious, the doctor can help create a treatment plan, prescribe medications, or refer the person to a specialist. In more severe cases, the doctor might recommend a treatment clinic or inpatient addiction center.

Medications can help people stop or reduce their drinking. Three medications are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for treating alcohol use disorders. One of these, disulfiram, causes unpleasant side effects such as nausea, vomiting, and a racing heart rate if you consume any alcohol while taking the drug. Understandably, some people don’t want to take this medication for that reason. The two other drugs, naltrexone and acamprosate, also have been shown effective at reducing alcohol craving in many heavy drinkers.

Behavioral therapy, such as counseling or support groups, can help people develop skills to avoid or overcome stress and other triggers that could lead to drinking. The approach can help people set realistic goals, identify the feelings and situations that might lead to heavy drinking, and offer tips to manage stress. It also helps to build a strong social support network.