

Alcohol & Drug Addiction

***** Alcohol & Drug Addiction (Part 1)*****

Narrator

References to alcohol and drugs go all the way back to biblical times. Americans spend over \$170 billion dollars a year on alcohol alone. And that's only the most commonly abused drug. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse: substance abuse, both alcohol and drugs costs an estimated 600 billion dollars per year this includes the costs of premature death and lost productivity. That amount has increased steadily since the 1970's and experts predict it will continue to rise because of the very nature of addiction.

David Friedman, PhD, Wake Forest University School of Medicine

Addiction, basically, is the loss of control of drug taking. That is, people who are addicted can't control when they use drugs, they can't control how many drugs they use.

Narrator

One early sign of a problem with alcohol: increased drinking, especially beyond your own self-imposed limits.

Martha Barrett, Patient

I started drinking a glass of wine with dinner. After a couple of months then it became 2 glasses of wine with dinner. After a few months it became 'well I might as well finish the whole bottle.'

Narrator

So, when does this at risk drinking turn into addiction? Addiction is defined as a brain disorder because drugs change the brain, its actual physical structure and how it functions. These changes can be long lasting and can lead to harmful behaviors.

David Friedman, PhD, Wake Forest University School of Medicine

The brain is a highly complex organ with many billions of nerve cells that communicate with each other and nerve cells use chemicals to talk to each other, and alcohol and other drugs disrupt that chemical communication.

One of the key chemical neurotransmitters, one of the chemical communicators in the brain reward circuit is called dopamine. And when dopamine is released by certain nerve cells, it's what helps us; it's what allows us to feel good. It allows us to feel good when we have eaten when we are hungry or when we drink something when we are thirsty. And what drugs do, all the drugs that people have abused is to release lots and lots of dopamine.

Jacob Frydman, Alternatives in Treatment, FL

Over time the brain stops producing those chemicals for itself and just relies on the steady intake of outside drugs.

Narrator

Scientists continue to search for specific genes that could identify those people who are at a higher risk of developing an addiction. Other risk factors include a person's environment including social stresses. Dr. Nora Volkow is director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Nora Volkow, MD, Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse

One of the factors that contributes to a greater vulnerability to take drugs is stress. And social stressors are probably some of the most powerful. Poverty increases the likelihood that you will encounter those social stressors.

Narrator

In his youth Tom Codere was always a high achiever. He had outstanding grades in high school and excelled in college. By the time he was a young adult he'd already accomplished an early goal. But that victory came with a price.

Tom Codere, Patient

When I was 25, became a state senator, it was a job with a lot of stress, a lot of pressures of life and I drank to cope with those stresses that I was experiencing. Before you know it I was in trouble and I was the last one to see it.

Narrator

Martha says her difficult early family life put her at risk for drug and alcohol use.

Martha Barrett, Patient

My parents fought a lot and it was usually when there was drinking going on. I can remember having my mother take me and my sisters and brothers out of the house and riding around in the car in the night time waiting until my dad would fall asleep, so it really put a lot of pressure on me as a kid.

Narrator

For a teenage Martha, underage drinking seemed like a good thing.

Martha Barrett, Patient

13 years old and drinking and thinking how great it was.

Narrator

But addiction isn't something that happens easily. The experts say most addicts must use a lot of the drugs or alcohol, use it very frequently and use it over a relatively long period of time.

Tom Codere, Patient

It didn't happen overnight it happened slowly.

Martha Barrett, Patient

I don't know how long it took me to actually become addicted to alcohol I think it was a slow process for me.

Narrator

Addiction is similar to other medical conditions because it disrupts the normal, functioning of the underlying organs, has serious harmful consequences, is preventable, treatable, and can last a lifetime. People who receive treatment are at less risk for related disabilities.

Still ahead, we'll look specifically at alcohol dependence. We'll discuss the damage alcohol can do to the body and see what's considered heavy or at risk drinking.

******* Alcohol & Drug Addiction (Part 2)*******

Narrator

Carlos Cano's alcoholism became a real problem as he developed his musical career.

Carlos Cano, Patient

I was a musician on Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee.

Narrator

Playing endless gigs in bars and clubs, he felt right at home with the hard-drinking rock star lifestyle but nagging health issues regularly sent him to the doctor.

Carlos Cano, Patient

One day he said 'have you thought about changing careers,' and I said music is my life, and without music I will die, and he said 'well you're going to die all right.'

Narrator

But Carlos couldn't stop drinking despite the obvious damage his substance abuse was doing to his body.

Carlos Cano, Patient

I would want to drink and use so bad that I didn't know how I was just going to get through the next moment.

Jacob Frydman, Alternatives in Treatment, FL

The alcohol directly attacks all the major organs of the body and deteriorates them, this includes particularly the liver.

Mark Willenbring, MD, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism

First of all it's absorbed not in the stomach, but in the small intestine just outside the stomach called the duodenum. Then it goes through the liver where a lot of it is metabolized. Once it goes through the liver then it's in the bloodstream, it goes all over the body, it has all variety of effects.

Martha Barrett, Patient

On my father's side both of his parents were heavy drinkers and both of them ended up dying of cirrhosis.

Narrator

Martha's drinking continued into her twenties when she met and married a man who also drank regularly.

Martha Barrett, Patient

He actually developed pancreatitis, and seizures, and became an insulin-dependent diabetic as the result of his drinking. For me depression was a big part of my physical ailments from alcoholism. I also developed stomach pain and went to the doctor and discovered I had severe gastritis.

Narrator

Chronic heavy drinking can gradually damage the body's organs, but even a single episode of binge drinking can be life threatening.

Mark Willenbring, MD, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism

As the blood alcohol level goes up, as you drink more and more, the sedation part of alcohol takes over and if you drink enough then you become comatose, and of course you can die from acute alcohol poisoning.

Narrator

The physical toll of chronic heavy drinking occurs whether a person is aware of it or not.

Martha Barrett, Patient

Over time you can drink more, it doesn't affect you mentally, you don't get drunk, but it physically is affecting you and you really don't realize the physical effects until it's too late.

Carlos Cano, Patient

I had a doctor say to me, he looked me right in the eye and said if you do not stop drinking you are going to die within a year. And, I believed him, but it didn't stop me.

Narrator

So how much is too much alcohol? It's best to follow the public health guidelines for moderate drinking: no more than two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women.

Mark Willenbring, MD, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism

A healthy adult man we recommend that they drink no more than 14 in a week. For women it's 7 in a week. Above that we consider that to be at risk drinking or heavy drinking.

Narrator

Clinicians recognize risk for current or future alcohol use disorders when male patients exceed 4 drinks/day and female patients exceed 3 drinks/day repeatedly over the course of a year. Nearly 3 in 10 US adults engage in at-risk drinking. They may not necessarily have health problems now but are at a significantly greater risk for developing health issues in the future.

Mark Willenbring, MD, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism

That's very similar to having high blood pressure or having high cholesterol before you have the heart attack these are risk factors for a problem that may develop later.

Narrator

The medical diagnosis may be the first inkling that a person has a problem with alcohol.

Mark Willenbring, MD, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism

Most people who develop problems related to their drinking are actually very functional. They're still working, they have intact families. In fact, in many instances people may not even know they have a problem.

Martha Barrett, Patient

I was still working, I still had my daughter, I still had my house, I was paying all my bills but little by little my drinking was increasing.

Mark Willenbring, MD, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism

People will spend more time thinking about drinking, anticipating drinking, drinking and recovering from drinking.

Narrator

And that's the definition of addiction to alcohol or other drugs: continuing to use despite adverse consequences.

Tom Codere, Patient

You know, it started to control me. It started to control who I was.

Carlos Cano, Patient

I wanted to drink. I wanted to use, no matter what.

Narrator

The best way to identify a loved one who may have a problem is if there is an obvious change, it is important to watch for any significant changes in physical appearance, personality, attitude or behavior.

Jacob Frydman, Alternatives in Treatment, FL

As soon as someone else is aware that a loved one has a problem, that would be the ideal time to look for help.

Narrator

Alcohol is the most commonly used drug, however people use and become addicted to numerous drugs. Like alcohol they all affect the way we feel and our behavior by the effects they have on our brain.

Nora Volkow, MD, Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse

The drugs, when they take it, go everywhere and as a result of that it is not surprising that many drugs have many adverse effects to multiple organs that can result in diseases.

Narrator

Over recent years there has been a clear rise in drug use amongst older Americans.

David Friedman, PhD, Wake Forest University School of Medicine

It's usually not what we consider illegal drugs like cocaine and marijuana but its more drugs they receive from their physicians. And over the counter medications.

Nora Volkow, MD, Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse

Have you ever had any problems taking drugs?

Individuals that are middle aged or more senior are getting addicted to drugs for the first time. They are getting addicted to pain medications.

Narrator

These drugs can be addictive; however addiction rates are relatively low. They can be very beneficial when used properly so the patient should not feel deterred from using them when needed, it's best to discuss these drugs with your physician.

Coming up, we will look at the treatments available for those who may have an alcohol or drug problem.

******* Alcohol & Drug Addiction (Part 3)*******

Nora Volkow, MD, Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse

If I have a problem with drug addiction it is my responsibility to seek help for it, it is my responsibility to follow up with treatment.

Narrator

There are treatments available but the first step for many may be to acknowledge there is a problem.

Martha Barrett, Patient

All of these things that happened to me in the past and drinking over them wasn't changing any of it.

Tom Codere, Patient

Many people experience shameful feelings about their addiction, you need to get over that you need to be able to reach out and ask for help.

David Friedman, PhD, Wake Forest University School of Medicine

It's not a one-time treatment; it's something that you have to change your behavior over a long period of time.

Narrator

Numerous medications have been helpful in treating patients who have problems with alcohol and other drugs.

David Friedman, PhD, Wake Forest University School of Medicine

One of the oldest ones is called disulfiram, and it essentially makes people sick when they drink. There are newer drugs which don't do that, but which block parts of the high that people feel where they help modulate the cravings that drive people to drink.

Carlos Cano, Patient

In my time, had the medications for alcoholism had been there, I would have been the very first one in line, saying give me that medication if it's going to help with my alcohol cravings and my mental obsession to drink.

Narrator

Medications are also available to assist with the treatment of opiate drugs like narcotic pain killers, heroin and so called "recreational drugs". These treatment medications block receptors in the brain so patients no longer get the high they once did from taking alcohol or drugs.

Nora Volkow, MD, Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse

All of these medications help the person that is addicted to drugs stop taking them, but they are not a universal solution.

Narrator

During the withdrawal period patients can experience significant symptoms. Medications are used to combat these symptoms.

David Friedman, PhD, Wake Forest University School of Medicine

Alcohol withdrawal is one of the most extreme withdrawal syndromes that we see with any drug and in fact can be life threatening. When people go into the hospital, they are often asked about their drinking habits, if they are going to have surgery for example, because the doctor wants to have some of those medications on board when people wake up, because obviously they are not getting any alcohol in the hospital. And the last thing you want is a patient recovering from surgery to go into withdrawal. But once that period is over then people will go into an outpatient form of treatment.

Narrator

NIAAA research has shown that as few as nine brief sessions with a health professional and medication can help to prevent early relapse and reduce relapse severity as effectively as longer term intensive behavioral treatment. At the same time, research has shown that long-term involvement in some type of professional treatment, aftercare, or mutual support Alcoholics Anonymous, for example can help to sustain and enhance long-term recovery.

David Friedman, PhD, Wake Forest University School of Medicine

And having them stick with that is the most important thing.

Narrator

Group therapy can be a very important phase of treatment.

Nora Volkow, MD, Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse

Some of the group therapies there is evidence that they are beneficial.

Narrator

The group therapies were a good fit for Martha; they helped her find the strength she needed.

Martha Barrett, Patient

Going to a 12 step meeting every day and networking and developing a support group of other men and women who had gone through the same thing that I had gone through.

Narrator

The essentials of a good treatment program appear to be: the combination of the drug and behavior treatments and psychotherapy. Another significant aspect of treatment is modifying the patient's environment and lifestyle.

Aldo Morales, MD, Alternatives in Treatment

For example, an addict has to change what is called people, places, and things. They need to change their environment so as to make it harder for the addiction to continue thriving.

Narrator

Recovery for patients is ongoing. Relapse is common, but these relapse rates rapidly drop the longer the patient is able to remain sober. After 5 years of sobriety, the relapse rate is relatively low, but those who have battled addiction should be aware that the addiction can always come back.

Martha Barrett, Patient

Today I know that once an alcoholic always an alcoholic. And it doesn't mean I am any less of a person, I just know today that my life is better when I don't drink.

Narrator

Coming up, we will learn what recovery is, and how patients dealing with addictions can rebuild their lives. Plus we'll talk about how families can deal with addictions in their loved ones.

******* Alcohol & Drug Addiction (Part 4)*******

Narrator

Support from friends and family is crucial. Addiction unfortunately affects more than just the person dealing with an alcohol or drug problem.

Carlos Cano, Patient

I think sometimes the families have it worse than the addict. Because of this, the addict who is in active addiction has the drugs and the alcohol to numb themselves, the families don't, they have nothing.

Narrator

Carlos knows first-hand the toll this can take on a family. His brother was a successful doctor, husband and father of three girls. He helped Carlos get treatment and recover from addiction, yet underneath he also silently suffered from the same disorder.

Carlos Cano, Patient

We didn't realize how bad he was because he hid it so well. The last conversation I had with him he asked me, 'do you think I am an alcoholic?' It was such an odd question for him to ask me, because he was very supportive of my recovery. Next thing I heard, I got a call from my mother that he had shot himself, and had died.

Narrator

There are addiction programs for families to help people cope with their loved ones' addictions. When Martha's first husband got sick from alcohol she attended these meetings for support.

Martha Barrett, Patient

By going to this group and learning more about what alcoholism is and how it affects different people in different ways, that I too had a problem with drinking.

Narrator

While treatment focuses on helping patients stop using alcohol and drugs in the short term. Recovery lasts for the rest of the person's life.

Carlos Cano, Patient

Real recovery is living your life not just free of drugs and alcohol, but living your life in a healthy way, physically, emotionally, mentally, psychologically, and spiritually whatever your spiritual connection may be.

Tom Codere, Patient

Recovery for me has given me stability in my life. It has given me new hope, and new purpose for the future and what being in recovery means for me is that not only don't I use alcohol and other drugs, but I'm able to create a better life for myself.

Martha Barrett, Patient

Recovery to me means that I have to stay diligent in terms of participating in a 12 step program of recovery, staying in touch with other sober people who know and understand what I've been through and not ever picking up a drink again.

Narrator

Addiction experts say that when formal treatment has ended, people should stay with some form of support that allows them to continually re-enforce the changes they made in treatment.

Carlos Cano, Patient

I discovered who I was, I found what I liked, I found that I could still play music clean and sober.

Martha Barrett, Patient

My life today is great as a sober woman I have an awesome job, I have a wonderful man in my life I have a healthy daughter, I have two dogs, I have a wonderful home and a great network of friends and sober people that I have met through the 12 step program.

Narrator

There is no question that people who regularly attend support group meetings and "work the program" are more likely to recover and less likely to relapse. They are easily accessible, free, and patients can try a few to find the unique one that suits them best.

Carlos Cano, Patient

Never be afraid to ask for help, I guess the advice would be to don't be afraid to recognize the problem within you.

Tom Codere, Patient

I would encourage people who find recovery to share that with somebody else to be able to go out and to share publicly where it makes sense that you are a person in recovery.

Narrator

Successful recovery from a chronic condition requires a lot of effort on the part of the patient. Work with your physician to develop a recovery program that suits you best.

Carlos Cano, Patient

Recovery is something real, it's not a figment of our imagination, it's something that is very real and it's very doable that if I can do it, if millions of others can do it, then you can do it.