

Is alcoholism a  
disease?



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\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

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1. [What is Alcoholism?](#) \n \t
2. [Alcoholism is a Disease](#) \n \t
3. [Alcoholism is not a disease](#) \n \t
4. [Conclusions](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

This paper explores ten published articles that report about alcoholism.

There are two sides: alcoholism is a disease or not a disease. Most of articles agree with a statement “ alcoholism is a disease”. However, some argue that alcoholism is just a treatable addiction and a choice. Also, people think alcoholism was named to help people recognize “ alcoholism is a serious problem”. It can be compared to diabetes in a equal way that over eaters have a reaction to food and alcoholics to liquor. It is time to examine what the alcoholism really is and explains the reason of the result for people who believe that alcoholism as an addiction, not a disease.

Alcoholism: Is Alcoholism a Disease?

One of the serious problems in the United States is alcoholism. It is the concept of drinking a large amount of an alcoholic beverage and those people who cannot control themselves become alcoholics. Alcoholics should learn how to manage themselves from alcohol to live healthy and to avoid alcoholism. Alcoholism can cause bad habits and it may build to a more serious health problem later such as cancer. Some people argue that alcoholism is a disease concept and other believes alcoholism is a choice.

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According to Hobbs, “ the debate on whether alcoholism is a disease or a personal conduct problem has continued for over 200 years” (2000). Now, let’s discover what alcoholism really is.

## **What is Alcoholism?**

To intelligently talk about the topic of whether alcoholism is a disease, the definition of alcoholism is necessary. When people talk about disease, they use the following three terms: disease, disorder, and syndrome. Mitchell (2001) explains the definition, symptoms of alcoholism and important way of recovery from alcohol. People who drink and do not become addicted to alcohol wind up suffering more devastating with the abuse of alcohol.

According to Gorski, “ many experts and laypersons disagree about whether alcoholism is a biological disease or merely a bad habit” (1998) but he argued that most alcoholics undoubtedly suffering from a biological disease and should to be treated accordingly by the management industry. Mitchell (2001) defined alcoholism as alcohol dependence syndrome and a disease characterized by loss of control, cravings, tolerance, and physical dependence. Glatt (1976) also said “ in Jellinek’s view, of his sense because physiopathological changes were involved: the loss of control and the inability to abstain varieties”. These definitions are founded from Glatt (1976). Loss of control is the inability of stop drinking once it has begun. Craving means a strong need or urge to drink and tolerance is the require drinking greater amounts of alcohol to get high. Physical dependence means withdrawal symptoms. These symptoms were identified before the 20th century and people have been researched ever since. Alcoholics frequently are aware of the disrupting effects that they cannot or not willing to give up

the strong physical and emotional dependence on alcohol. Mitchell further states, alcoholism is a treatable disease, “ the sooner a person is able to acknowledge a need for help, the better are his or her chances for recovery” (2001). However, there is no guarantee people will quit drinking but will prove to struggle with alcohol in their everyday life.

## **Alcoholism is a Disease**

Due to the alcoholism being defined as a fatal and continual disease characterized by physical dependence, tolerance, and pathological organ changes, it is a disease. The disease is many times fatal and progressive. Disease is characterized by uncontrollable over drinking, and alcohol use regardless of any consequence. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism explained, “ the craving that an alcoholic feels for alcohol can be as strong as the need for food or water and an alcoholic will continue to drink despite serious family, health, or legal problems” (2008). Equal to other diseases, alcoholism is considered to be chronic.

According to Gorski (1998), there are few different types of alcoholism. In the modern day, Dr. Benjamin Rush medical researcher studied alcoholism. The idea was discover an alcohol related syndrome of medical problems as a disease. His explanation of the symptoms was unfinished though. However, the inquiry began a procedure of alcoholism medical examination as a disease. In the middle of 1950, the medical examination concluded with the Yale and Rutgers schools of alcohol studies’ projects. These projects finally ended in a great significant part of information which created a convincing argument that alcoholism was in fact a disease. Congress of the United States seemed to be convinced and created the National Institute of Alcohol

Abuse and Alcoholism to implement treatment programs all over the country. Overall, many people treating alcoholics never went back to the original source which clearly demonstrated an understanding of alcoholism; they divided alcoholism into five different subtypes: alpha, beta, gamma, delta, and epsilon. Not all of alcohol problems are with the disease of alcoholism. These definitions are from Gorski (1998). Alpha alcoholics normally depend on psychological but without physical. Beta alcoholics are not physically addicted to the alcohol but related to physical health problems like liver damage. Gamma alcoholics are both physically and psychologically dependent on alcohol. Delta alcoholics are also physically and psychologically dependent on alcohol but drinking intensity does not increase. The epsilon alcoholics are same as the periodic alcoholic, one may have a period of relapses and a binge stays for a long time. Overall, gamma, delta, and epsilon alcoholics are disease. In past three years, the disease concept of alcoholism reviewed by Jellinek. According to Jellinek's topology, gamma, delta, and epsilon alcoholisms met the criteria for disease. Therefore, not all but some of alcoholisms are consider as a disease.

Alcoholism contains symptoms and the danger of increasing alcoholism is influenced by his or her genes and by lifestyle. According to Pace (2001), Dr. Charles Lieber treated a patient for pancreatitis and a heart problem. If the patient did not experienced from the alcoholism for years, he would not have these problems in his life. Doctors definitely could seek the medical consequences, even though the patient has been through treatment. Dr. Lieber always explains about the metabolism of alcohol to his patients. There

are many different ways of breaking down alcohol used by the patient when alcoholic develops to alcoholism.

We know that alcohol is eliminated from the body through the liver, which breaks down the alcohol to carbon dioxide and water. A normal liver cell produces two main enzymes. One is called alcohol dehydrogenase; it breaks the alcohol down to acetaldehyde, which is a poison. A good liver takes that acetaldehyde and with the help of a second enzyme called aldehyde dehydrogenase, further oxidizes it, breaking it down with a very complicated metabolic process, to carbon dioxide and water. That's how the normal liver breaks down alcohol. As long as this system is working there is no problem. (Pace, 2001)

Dr. Lieber explained that the enzyme is produced by the nucleus of the liver cell, cytochrome, when anyone develops alcoholism (Pace, 2001).

Cytochrome allows the liver to break the alcohol faster but the enzyme produces infinite number of the acetaldehyde which is very toxic to the liver and cannot clear from the body. As the result, not enough second enzyme is available to continue the process of breaking alcohol. Therefore, alcoholics should be educated of how alcohol affects their liver. Patients should realize that they are having metabolic defects which affect their livers due to alcohol. Once a liver loses the ability to breakdown, nobody can put it back to a workable liver.

The brain is another organ in our bodies that is very involved with alcohol. According to Waldo, “ when alcohol or other addictive drugs are introduced into a body predisposed by inherited genetics to addiction, permanent

biological changes occur in the brain” (2000). Nerve cells that drive messages to the brain about feelings, thoughts, and learning are obstructed by alcohol. Also, alcohol interrupts the neurotransmitters that lead to brain shrinkage and it causes increased tolerances like aggressiveness. Animal studies showed that many brain chemicals intake depletes and those chemicals causes feeling of pleasure. Alcohol loses the chemicals that cause depression and stress at the same time. The imbalance of chemical in the brain may be responsible for alcoholism. Swartzwelder, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at Duke University Medical Center, said “ alcohol may retard teenagers’ mental growth” (2001). Because teenagers’ brains are vulnerable, still growing and developing, alcohol is especially dangerous to them if they drink alcohol in that age. Many people believe that the brain stop developing after the birth but the newest research founded the result that the brain keep develops during adolescence until the age of twenty. In experiments of studying brain circuits, alcohol was effective to brain even after the age of twenty. Alcohol was effective on the function of a brain chemical which is critical for mental function. Therefore, alcoholics should understand how unique and important their brains are for themselves and everyone else surrounded them. However, instead of calling it a brain disease, it is more than that because the whole body is affected. For example, if anyone is drunk, his or her cerebellum gets interfered because of alcohol. Some of long-term effects are going on the nervous system. Hepatoma is very widespread on the alcoholic; colon and liver cancer are rare primary diseases. Therefore, Pace is saying that, “... alcoholism is a disease that affects not only the brain but also the liver, stomach, kidney, intestines, and pancreas” (2001).

## **Alcoholism is not a disease**

Some people argue that alcoholism is not a disease. Dreyfus said, “alcoholism was originally termed a disease in order to help people understand that it is a serious problem for which they should seek help” (2003). Now, it is overused to the extent in the world that alcoholics wrongly assume that they have ill physically and require medical help to overcome alcoholism. The following research showed that alcoholism is a choice.

According to the Baldwin Research Institute in the following viewpoint, the disease concept, alcoholism is based on fraudulent research and has no scientific basis. This theory has been spread by an alcoholism treatment industry that earns billions of dollars from treatment programs, insists the institute; however, it actually creates a reduced chance of sobriety for alcoholics. In reality, alcoholism is a choice; the best way for alcoholics to recover is to take responsibility for their alcoholism. The BRI is a nonprofit organization that conducts research and develops programs to facilitate recovery from problems associated with alcohol and other drugs. (Baldwin Research Institute, 2007)

In addition, science and history proved that the disease of alcoholism is pure speculation. America medical professionals and culture embraced the concept of disease and they related it to all credible behavior from alcohol abuse to lecturing. However, the disease concept was a panacea. Therefore, researchers founded that alcoholism is a choice.

According to Fingarette, “ the alcoholic is a tragic figure and deserves our compassion but the idea that alcoholism is a disease is a harmful myth”



(2001). The most persistent myth of the disease concept of alcoholism is that when a sober alcoholic gets a first drink, the effect causes a physical inability to quit. This is totally wrong. Alcoholics were deceived on what they are drinking. Those people who drink alcohol in reality, but were think that their beverage was non-alcoholic, got no effort to drink much. None of them drank uncontrollably even after they got alcohol.

There is few myths related alcoholism. Hanson explained several myths about drinking alcohol and causes of alcoholism in the following. According to Hanson, " alcohol is the cause of alcoholism" (2008). The fact is that the governmental alcohol agency clarified, " alcohol does not cause alcoholism" and he continued. If alcohol causes alcoholism, then all of drinkers would become alcoholics. Additionally, the members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) are people who born in alcoholic who never caused by alcohol in their lives. In fact, anyone cannot become an alcoholic without alcohol but the members of Alcoholics Anonymous said that most people born and die alcoholics without having had any of alcohol. Thus, Hanson's viewpoint is that alcoholism may present to someone who never had alcohol but alcoholism is a disease that caused by alcohol. Another myth is about the brain cells. Hanson explained the myth: alcohol destroys brain cells. In fact, the alcohol does not destroy brain cells. Alcohol is related with improved mental (cognitive) functioning. Therefore, those myths explained by Hanson might confuse everyone. However, alcohol originally brings bad health overall and one fact that people should know is that alcohol historically used for antiseptic, medicinal, and analgesic properties.

Further, people who have emotional difficulties were saying the effects are sick and suffering from calling it a disease. Alcoholism and compulsive overeating are diseases like diabetics react to sugar in a same way as overeaters have a reaction to all kind of food and alcoholics to alcohol. Therefore, the individuals must carefully watch for intake. If people do not rigidly care the respective diets, they will get dire results. For example, if a person does not monitor for food intake, then there will be a chemical imbalance that might take to unmanageable health. Therefore, the theory explained that over eater is not normal but rather a person has a disease, is sick. The diabetic disease is something that the body's failure to produce sufficient insulin. It is not the individual's fault to continue on the diabetic diet. It is manner of the body's metabolizing alcohol which may be the disease, leading to the need for dietary control, the substance abuse, and abstinence. There might be a chemical or biological basis for compulsions; the disease model does not count as the compulsive behavior itself. It is accountable for the specific substance.

## **Conclusions**

Numerous number of scientists and organizations continued work on alcoholism over two hundred years to find out what it is. Some people say that alcoholism was originally named a disease to help people recognize that it is as serious problem in the world for which alcoholics should seek help; however, alcoholism is an alcohol dependence syndrome and a disease characterized by loss of control, cravings, tolerance, and physical dependence. If a person cannot control the amount of drinking alcohol, he or she will get to alcoholism. Alcoholism brings very affective health problem to

alcoholics. The brain disease may occur because there are important nerve cells that may destroy due to alcohol. The liver is another organ that is related to alcohol. In fact, not only the brain and liver may devastate, alcohol will spread out into the whole body and an alcoholic's health will get worse overall. Alcoholism is a treatable disease though but alcoholics should realize having the alcoholism and start the treatment as soon as possible to have an excellent result. Therefore, there is no guarantee that people will deny drinking alcohol but the treatment probably will confirm to struggle with alcohol. Because alcoholism is increasing in the world and causes bad health, everyone should endeavor to prevent people who are reaching alcoholism. The disease concept of alcoholism needs to be over. All the alcoholics should take the best treatment for themselves to make the alcoholism not exist in the world anymore.