

## Drinking addiction: Psychological or physical? <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

Is alcoholism an habitual addiction or can it also be a chemical one? I have heard that it is not chemical, but have lived with people who needed the alcohol every night.

Signed,  
Healthy Drinker?

### **Answer**

Dear Healthy Drinker?,

It makes sense that you're confused, because alcoholism can be BOTH a habitual (psychological) and a chemical (physical) addiction. Some people become dependent on drinking, and like your housemate(s), need the alcohol every night. Psychological dependence is drinking in order to function "normally" and feel good. Physical dependence is when the person's body has adapted to chronic use of the booze, and would suffer physical symptoms when s/he stopped drinking.

A person can be psychologically dependent without being physically dependent, but a person can't be physically dependent without being psychologically dependent. Those addicted to drinking develop an increased physical tolerance to the booze, and need to gradually drink more in order to achieve the same amount of drunkenness. Chronic alcoholism occurs when there are both physical and psychological addictions. Alcoholism is treatable and controllable, but not curable. And, it's much easier to treat the physical dependency than to treat the psychological dependency.

Some of the warning signs of someone who is headed towards a drinking problem are:

- Usually has more than two or three drinks per night
- Drinking more than two to three times a week
- Sometimes can't remember things s/he did while drinking
- Gets drunk after making a conscious decision to stay sober

- Gets irritated at literature about drinking problems, or friends who express concern

If you or anyone else needs more information, or are concerned about someone else's drinking, there are resources available. One option is to explore counseling. In addition, check out the resources below.

- [Alcoholics Anonymous](#) [2]
- [AI-Anon/Alateen](#) [3]
- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) [4]
- [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism](#) [5]

Alice!

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[What's the difference between an addiction and a compulsion?](#) [9]

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## Resources

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