

# Alcohol Use Disorder vs. Alcoholism

Not everyone who drinks has a drinking problem, and those who do aren't all alike. People differ in the degree to which alcohol impairs their health and their life, and modern psychological assessment has taken this into consideration. Consider that "alcoholism" is a word used in conversation, but it's not a medical diagnosis or the official name of any disorder. Alcohol Use Disorder is the medical term for the disease people think of when they refer to alcoholism.

An alcohol use disorder may be mild, moderate, or severe. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, "AUD is a chronic relapsing brain disease characterized by compulsive alcohol use, loss of control over alcohol intake, and a negative emotional state when not using." [1] An estimated 15 million people in the United States are estimated to have AUD, but some cases are more severe than others, and only 10 percent of people with AUD get the help they need to overcome it.

In 2013, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) was updated to reflect the current criteria used to diagnose AUD. It classifies individuals as having an AUD if they meet any two of the eleven criteria listed below in the same 12-month period:

1. Drinking more or for longer than intended
2. Feeling unable to cut back on their consumption of alcohol
3. Becoming sick as a result of drinking too much alcohol
4. Inability to concentrate due to intense cravings for alcohol
5. Impaired ability to care for a family, hold down a job, or perform in school
6. Continuing to drink despite serious problems caused by drinking, such as harm done to one's relationships, work or school, health issues, and legal problems
7. Decreased participation in once pleasurable activities
8. Finding oneself in dangerous or harmful situations as a direct result of drinking
9. Continuing to drink despite adding to another health problem, feeling depressed, anxious, or blacking out
10. Drinking more as a result of a tolerance to alcohol
11. Experiencing [withdrawal symptoms](#)

Experiencing 2 or 3 of these symptoms in a single 12-month period indicates the presence of a mild alcohol use disorder. A person with a moderate AUD will have 4-5 of these symptoms, and a person with six or more symptoms has a severe alcohol use disorder—colloquially, alcoholism.

## Alcoholism

Alcoholism describes someone who suffers from severe alcohol dependence. The term is widely used to describe people who drink too much, too often, or lose control of themselves when drinking. People who suffer from alcoholism typically experience many or all of the symptoms in the DSM-V criteria for alcohol use disorder. Anyone dependent on drinking alcohol to get through their day, is unable to stop drinking, or continues to drink even though they experience negative consequences may be an alcoholic.

The terms “alcoholic” and “alcoholism” are most commonly used among people who are involved in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). The “Big Book” used as a fundamental guide in AA goes in-depth to describe the behaviors and thought patterns of alcoholics as well as the disease of alcoholism. [2] However, the program is careful not to label anyone as an alcoholic. They encourage their members to determine whether or not they suffer from alcoholism.

## What’s The Difference Between Alcoholism and Alcohol Use Disorder?

The main difference between the terms alcoholism and alcohol use disorder is that AUD is used by medical professionals to make a diagnosis. AUD is also used by rehab professionals in delivering treatment.

Alcoholism, on the other hand, is not a medical term. Instead, the term “alcoholism” is used by the public to describe moderate to severe AUD. The two terms both describe [abnormal drinking](#), but AUD describes the severity of a person’s drinking problem.

If you visit a doctor, alcohol rehab professional, or psychiatrist, they won’t give you a diagnosis of alcoholism. However, they might refer you to treatment or counseling for an alcohol use disorder. This diagnosis and recommendation will come from an analysis using the DSM-V. If you step into the rooms of AA seeking support for a drinking problem, you probably won’t hear the words “alcohol use disorder” used. Instead, you will hear them refer to dangerous patterns of drinking and behaviors as alcoholism.

## Does Rehab Treat Alcohol Use Disorder?

Rehab is a highly effective treatment for all degrees of alcohol use disorder. When you receive treatment, you increase your chances of overcoming AUD. If you’re concerned you or a loved one may have an alcohol use disorder, [Agape Treatment Center](#) in Fort Lauderdale is available to help.

Please [give us a call](#)—we are ready to help you around the clock, every day of the week. Our [admissions counselors](#) will work with you in determining your treatment options, how to cover the cost of treatment and set up a date and a time for intake.

## References

1. <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-use-disorders>
2. <https://www.aa.org/the-big-book>