Q&A: Is daily drinking problem drinking?

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Dear Mayo Clinic: Is it possible to become an alcoholic just by having one or two drinks nightly? I have a glass or two of wine with dinner but never drink to the point of feeling drunk. Should I be concerned?

A: Occasional beer or wine with dinner, or a drink in the evening, is not a health problem for most people. When drinking becomes a daily activity, though, it may represent progression of your consumption and place you at increased health risks. From your description of your drinking habits, it may be time to take a closer look at how much you drink.

Drinking alcohol in moderation generally is not a cause for concern. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, drinking is considered to be in the moderate or low-risk range for women at no more than three drinks in any one day and no more than seven drinks per week. For men, it is no more than four drinks a day and no more than 14 drinks per week.

Those guidelines are based on standard-size drinks, which contain about 14 grams of pure alcohol. That equals 5 ounces of wine, 12 ounces of beer, 8 to 9 ounces of malt liquor and 1.5 ounces (one shot) of 80-proof spirits or "hard" liquor.

That said, it's easy to drink more than a standard drink in one glass. For example, many wine glasses hold far more than 5 ounces. You could easily drink 8 ounces of wine in a glass. If you have two of those glasses during a meal, you are consuming about three standard drinks.

Although not drinking to the point of becoming drunk is a common way people gauge how much they should drink, it can be inaccurate. Researchers who study alcohol abuse find that people with high tolerance to alcohol, who do not feel the effects of alcohol after they drink several alcoholic beverages, are actually at a higher risk for alcohol-related problems.

It's also important to note that, even though you may not feel the effects of alcohol, you still have the same amount of alcohol in your body as

someone who starts to feel intoxicated after one or two drinks. Your lack of response to the alcohol may be related to an increase in your body's alcohol tolerance over time. Some people are born with high tolerance; many people develop a tolerance with regular drinking.

Drinking more than the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism recommended limits puts you in the category of "at-risk" drinking. That means you have a higher risk for negative consequences related to your alcohol use, including health and social problems. You are also at higher risk of becoming addicted to alcohol.

Alcohol can damage your body's organs and lead to various health concerns. For women, this damage happens with lower doses of alcohol, because their bodies have lower water content than men. That's why the moderate drinking guidelines for women and men are so different.

The specific organ damage that happens with too much alcohol use varies considerably from one person to another. The most common health effects include heart, liver and nerve damage, as well as memory problems and sexual dysfunction.

Unless you notice specific negative consequences related to your drinking, it probably is not necessary for you to quit drinking alcohol entirely. However, I would strongly encourage you to reduce the amount you drink, so it fits within the guidelines of moderate drinking. Doing so can protect your health in the long run.

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