

Understanding *Alcohol Use Disorder*

What is Alcohol Use Disorder?

Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD) is a medical condition that is diagnosed by a health professional. The disease is characterized by an impaired ability to stop or control alcohol use despite adverse social, occupational or health effects. To receive a diagnosis, a healthcare professional will consider an individual's patterns of alcohol use, whether it is problematic or leading to clinically significant impairment or distress across a person's health, work or personal life in a 12-month period. An AUD diagnosis can range from mild to severe.

Millions of individuals worldwide have an AUD, and millions are in long-term recovery from an AUD. An AUD often requires medical and behavioral interventions to address.

Why Report on AUD?

Alcohol is one of the most widely consumed and socially accepted substances. AUD is also the most common substance use disorder (SUD) in the U.S. Addressing AUD can have profound public health benefits, from reducing alcohol-related accidents and illnesses to fostering healthier communities. Reporting can help communities better understand evidence-based prevention, harm reduction, treatment and recovery for AUD.

The American Society of Addiction Medicine defines addiction as:

... a treatable, chronic medical disease involving complex interactions among brain circuits, genetics, the environment, and an individual's life experiences.

What can journalists do?

As a journalist, your reporting can raise awareness and destigmatize AUD by focusing on these key points:

- Public Awareness:** Inform audiences about the health risks of alcohol and the signs of AUD. Discuss the difficulties some face when cutting back alcohol use, including the dangers of withdrawal for those with an AUD.
- Resources for Help:** Highlight available treatments, such as those through the NIH's National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) Alcohol Treatment Navigator.

Understanding AUD

Health Risks of Alcohol Use

Studies link alcohol consumption to numerous health issues, including liver disease, heart disease and certain cancers. In 2024, the U.S. Surgeon General highlighted alcohol's causal role in at least seven types of cancer.

These findings reinforce the importance of reducing consumption and providing resources for those with AUD.

Recognizing AUD

For many, recognizing AUD is complicated by cultural and social norms surrounding drinking and can obscure the need for treatment and delay recognition of the condition. For example, people often struggle to differentiate between social drinking and problematic patterns.

Some indicators of AUD include:

- Drinking more than intended or struggling to cut back
- Cravings or strong desires to drink
- Alcohol use interfering with work, relationships or responsibilities
- Developing a tolerance or experiencing withdrawal symptoms like nausea, shakiness or anxiety

These signs often require careful attention and support from healthcare professionals for proper diagnosis and treatment.

Treating AUD

There are evidence-based treatments for an AUD, but like any SUD, there is not a magic wand or a one size fits all solution to treating this complex disease.

Medications

Three FDA-approved medications can assist in treating AUD:

1. **Naltrexone:** Reduces the pleasurable effects of alcohol. *Brand name: Vivitrol*
2. **Acamprosate:** Helps manage withdrawal symptoms and cravings. *Brand name: Campral*
3. **Disulfiram:** Causes adverse reactions to alcohol, deterring consumption. *Brand name: Antabuse*

Despite their effectiveness, these treatments remain underutilized, often due to stigma or lack of awareness among the public and providers.

Behavioral Interventions

Behavioral therapies, including individual psychotherapy (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy), group therapy and mutual support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), are widely used.

These approaches focus on addressing the psychological and social aspects of AUD, complementing medical treatments.

Story Tag:

We recommend you include this push to resources at the beginning and/or end of your coverage when reporting on AUD:

Recovery from addiction is possible. For help, please call the free and confidential treatment referral hotline (1-800-662-HELP), or visit alcoholtreatment.niaaa.nih.gov

If limited space, use this condensed version:

For help, call the free and confidential treatment referral hotline (1-800-662-HELP), or visit alcoholtreatment.niaaa.nih.gov

Reporting Resources:

- [Language Style Guide](#)
- [Visual Style Guide](#)
- [Expert Database](#)

Treatment Resources:

- For confidential support, call the free referral hotline at 1-800-662-HELP
- Visit the NIAAA's Alcohol Treatment Navigator: alcoholtreatment.niaaa.nih.gov

About Reporting on Addiction

We are a 501c3-supported organization dedicated to increasing the accuracy and empathy of reporting on addiction. To accomplish this, Reporting on Addiction provides innovative training, technical assistance, and resources for journalists, journalism educators, experts through training, and experts through experience.

We work to:

- Improve the themes/story narratives chosen by journalists.
- Improve the language used by journalists.
- Improve the images/videos created by journalists.

