Short of immediate death, long term overuse of alcohol can cause liver damage, heart problems, sexual dysfunction, and other serious medical problems. It is a fact that alcohol has some effect on every organ in the body. Workers who use alcohol affect everyone. Studies show that compared to substance-free workers, those who abuse substances are less productive, miss more work days, are more likely to injure themselves or someone else, and file more workers’ compensation claims. Left untreated, alcoholism is a chronic disease that always progresses.

**Signs and Symptoms of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism**

*Signs of both in the workplace*

**Warning Signs of Abusive Drinking**
- Becomes aggravated if asked to justify his/her drinking or amount.
- Drinks at certain time each day.
- Becomes irritable if the pattern/time is disrupted (asked to work late etc.).
- Strained spousal relationships (more talk of problems at home).
- Loses interest in prior hobbies or activities that seemed important (not as much cross talk on the job).
- Prefers to only go to functions where alcohol is served (complains if not available).
- Drinks to become drunk (last person to leave the bar).
- Starts to drink by him/herself on purpose (no one to comment on amount of drinks consumed).

**Warning Signs and Stages of Alcoholism**
Alcoholism is normally very progressive in nature. However, even though there is a difference, many of the signs and symptoms of alcoholism and abusive drinking do match up in the early stages. Alcoholism, the disease, can be tracked through three different stages—**Early, Middle** and **Late**. Each of these stages is accompanied by “denial”, that is, the abuser is not willing to admit he or she has a problem. At this point, the substance abuser is considered to be in “a state of denial”. Each stage of continuing abuse has distinctive symptoms and workplace related characteristics.

**Early Stage**

**What the Alcoholic May Experience**

1. **Drinking for relief** from whatever is bothering the employee. This could include anxiety, depression, physical pain, etc. These emotions/feelings can be real or imagined but, in either case, the employee starts to deal with the “pain” by self-administering a very powerful anesthetic. That anesthetic is the painkiller and drug we call alcohol. This is the beginning of using alcohol as a mood-altering substance.
2. **An increase in tolerance**. As the disease progresses, it takes more alcohol to get the desired “high”. In social circles, friends and acquaintances may notice the employee’s alcohol intake and will comment that the abuser can “hold his/her liquor”. In our society, this is sometimes considered a positive statement.
3. **Blackouts**. The abuser will start to “lose” or forget portions of daily life as alcohol intake increases. In some instances, young adults mention this symptom as a positive sign of their ability to drink a large amount of alcohol. Blackouts may take the form of forgetting how one got home after a night of drinking, where one left personal belongings or car keys after a party, forgotten conversations while drinking at social gatherings, or losing complete portions of a day after the drinking has reached an intense level.
4. **Drunk driving citations**. The abuser either does not recognize the problem or is in denial, and therefore continues to drink, drive, and get DUI citations. In time, the drinker often causes a serious accident, hurting himself and/or others.
5. **Lies about drinking**. Since the abusers deny a problem or that the drinking behavior is out of control, they refuse to talk to friends, family or supervisors about the situation. This means they must respond to anyone who inquires or comments about the drinking by insisting that there really is “no problem”. The abuser generally transfers the blame to the person who raises the issue, so that the cycle of self-deception, lies and abuse can continue.
6. **Loss of control.** The abuser starts to lose a sense of predictability regarding the quantity of alcohol that can be safely consumed at one time. While social drinking consisting of one or two drinks was once possible, it now becomes difficult to stay within the intended limit once drinking begins.

### What the Supervisor May Notice
- A general tardiness at the start of the workday.
- Coming back to the workplace late after lunch and breaks.
- Leaving the workplace early.
- Being overly sensitive to criticism.
- Increased complaints from co-workers who have to interact with the abuser.
- Continual abuser complaints about health and how he/she feels.
- Lies about anything that would reveal the drinking problem.
- Denial of the problem.
- Decreased job performance.

### Middle Stage

### What the Alcoholic May Experience
1. **Family problems.** The family/spousal relationship starts to disintegrate as the abuser withdraws from the day to day responsibilities of the family, decreases the time available to support the family unit, and increases the time spent drinking. Many times, abusers also start to blame the spouse for any and all family problems as their process of denial continues. These family problems also become a common thread in conversations outside the home with "buddies".

2. **Financial problems.** Since more and more money is being spent on alcohol, there are fewer resources to meet other financial obligations. The quality of family life starts to decline and calls from lending institutions become commonplace.

3. **Sneaky drinking.** At this point, since the abuser is unable to get through the day without alcohol, bottles may be hidden in the workplace, car, and out of the way places on-the-job. Bottles can also be hidden at home, so that the family will not witness the frequent drinking nights and weekends.

4. **Legal problems.** These problems arise generally because of accompanying financial irresponsibility, marital conflict, DWI or other alcohol-related criminal offenses, such as assault and battery.

5. **Ethical and moral changes.** As alcohol strengthens its grip, character and morality start to disintegrate. Drinking becomes the focus of daily activity. Participation in church and civic groups generally ceases as family and community interests take a back seat to drinking.

6. **Resentfulness of authority.** Where constructive criticism was once welcome, any type of authority or feedback may be met with hostility; the abuser believes he is being singled out for punishment. Since the abuser cannot admit to the drinking problem, he also cannot acknowledge any responsibility for decreased workplace competence.

7. **Drinking alone.** The pretense of social drinking is abandoned as the abuser now drinks with or without friends. Where once the main reason for a Friday afternoon beer was the fellowship of workers and time spent on relaxation, companionship is no longer required. The main reason for time spent in a bar is consumption of alcohol and, secondarily, the implicit support obtained through time spent with other addicted individuals.

8. **Guilt and remorse.** When sober, the abuser regrets not being able to live up to family and personal expectations. Professions of great remorse and resolutions to stop drinking and meet family responsibilities are earnestly endorsed during these periods. Unfortunately, that momentary resolve generally fades away as the disease progresses.
What the Supervisor May Notice

- Frequent absenteeism, even beyond earned holidays, vacation, and sick days.
- Family emergencies and frequent problems reported as absenteeism excuses.
- Quick to anger when questioned about job performance.
- Poor general attitude and lack of discipline.
- Hostile attitude whenever approached on any alcohol issues.
- Increased injuries both on and off the job.
- Continued general breakdown in health and wellness.
- Increased need for medical attention.
- Unreliable and inattentive work habits.
- Borrows or steals money, garnishments.
- Increased requirement for disciplinary actions.
- Broad deterioration of job performance on all fronts.

Late Stage

What the Alcoholic May Experience

1. **General and continuous health problems.** The alcoholic begins to suffer physical changes, since alcohol disrupts diet, provides poor nourishment and starts to poison many of the body’s organs.
2. **Contemplation of suicide.** Daily life is now thoroughly disrupted, and includes conflicts within the home and family, loss of self-respect, serious work problems with the immediate possibility of losing one’s job, serious health issues, and financial strain. At this point the alcoholic either doesn’t want to or doesn’t think he is able to stop drinking, and death begins to look like the only way to solve all of these problems.

What the Supervisor May Notice

- Prolonged absences.
- Aggressive behavior when questioned.
- Drinking on the job.
- Obvious physical deterioration.
- Marital problems/divorce.
- Financial problems/bankruptcy.
- Cause for termination.