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Long-Term Health Problems Associated with Chronic Heavy Drinking

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Director of Behavioral Health Central Intake Services at Catholic Health [Lawrence Ferber, Ph.D.](#) shares how the risk for multiple diseases and conditions increases with heavy alcohol consumption.

What health issues are associated with chronic heavy drinking?

Heavier alcohol consumption has been linked to more than 60 different diseases. Alcohol travels from the stomach and intestines through the bloodstream. This overloads the liver's ability to process alcohol, directly affecting brain neurology and potentially converting alcohol into carcinogens.

Cancer

Research studies show an association between alcohol consumption and several types of cancer. The more alcohol a person drinks—particularly the more alcohol a person drinks regularly over time—the higher the likelihood of developing alcohol-associated cancer. Researchers believe that alcohol is



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of the mouth, throat, esophagus, liver, colorectal region, and breast have all been linked to heavy alcohol use.

Brain

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, even mild alcohol use can affect the brain by:

- Creating difficulty walking

- Blurring vision

- Slurring speech

- Slowing reaction times

- Impairing memory

The long-term impact on the brain depends on several factors, including:

- How much and how often a person drinks

- Age of onset when drinking first began and how long the drinking is ongoing

- Age, level of education, gender, genetic background and family history of alcohol abuse

- At risk as a result of prenatal alcohol exposure

- General health status

The effects can range from dementia and intellectual functioning to debilitating conditions that require long-term care, even if a person has been in recovery and sober for some time.

Cardiovascular

Binge drinking can lead to blood clots, heart attacks, stroke, cardiomyopathy (a potentially deadly condition where the



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Liver

The liver filters out harmful substances, cleans our blood, stores energy and aids in digestion. Too much alcohol can be toxic to liver cells, which causes dehydration and permanent scarring. This ultimately affects the blood flow. Common signs and symptoms of cirrhosis include fatigue, itchy skin, weight loss, nausea, yellow eyes and skin, abdominal pain and swelling or bruising. Advanced cirrhosis can be life-threatening.

Pancreas

Alcohol causes the pancreas to produce toxic substances that can eventually lead to pancreatitis, a dangerous inflammation and swelling of the blood vessels in the pancreas that prevents proper digestion. The resulting severe abdominal pain and persistent diarrhea may not be fixable.

Immune System

Drinking too much can weaken the immune system, which makes the body a much easier target for disease. Chronic drinkers are more liable to contract diseases like pneumonia and tuberculosis than moderate drinkers. Drinking often on a single occasion can slow your body's ability to ward off infections—even up to 24 hours after getting drunk.

How to Get Help

Catholic Health offers services and programs across Long Island to help with [substance abuse problems](#). Our experts are skilled in all aspects of detoxification, rehabilitation and recovery. We create a treatment plan that fits your unique



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