

# Medication for Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD) to BUILD HEALTHIER NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITIES

## What is excessive alcohol use?

A standard alcoholic drink is 14 grams or 0.6 fluid ounces of pure alcohol. The alcohol content of different types of beer, wine, and liquor may vary. Typically, one standard drink consists of 12.0 ounces of beer at 5% alcohol by volume (ABV), 5.0 ounces of wine at 12% ABV, or 1.5 ounces of liquor at 40% ABV.

Excessive alcohol use includes **four types** of drinking:

- **Binge drinking:** Four or more drinks for women, five or more drinks for men during one occasion\*
- **Heavy drinking:** Eight or more drinks for women, 15 or more drinks for men during a week\*
- **Underage drinking:** Any alcohol use by people under the age of 21
- **Drinking while pregnant:** Any alcohol use during pregnancy

\*Older adults who choose to drink may experience the effects of alcohol more quickly than they did when they were younger. This can put older adults at a higher risk for alcohol-related harms.<sup>1</sup>

No amount of alcohol is safe for health. Each alcoholic beverage can increase the risk of alcohol-related harms. To reduce alcohol-related harms, national guidelines recommend that adults who are of legal drinking age choose not to drink alcohol, or to cut back on alcohol use. If adults of legal age choose to drink, drinking less is better for health than drinking more. Certain populations, such as those who are under the age of 21, pregnant, or planning to become pregnant, should not consume alcohol.<sup>2</sup>

## What is AUD?

AUD is a specific psychiatric diagnosis in which alcohol use causes substantial distress or impairment with symptoms that can include excessive use, unsuccessful attempts at cutting back, craving, tolerance, and withdrawal.<sup>3</sup> Not all with AUD drink daily or develop withdrawal symptoms if they stop drinking.

Not everyone who drinks alcohol excessively meets the criteria for AUD. Nine out of 10 people who excessively drink **do not** meet the criteria for AUD but still may benefit from professional help for their drinking behaviors.<sup>4</sup> To learn more about screening, brief intervention, and referral to treatment for excessive alcohol use, please see the [Build Healthier North Carolina Communities: Have Your Clinic Screen for and Intervene on Excessive Alcohol Use \(PDF\) factsheet.](#)

## What proportion of those with AUD receive treatment?

Despite the existence of medications to treat AUD, less than 1 out of 4 Americans seeking treatment for AUD reported receiving treatment with medication.<sup>5</sup>

## Selection of medications for AUD

To access current prescribing guidelines, providers should review the [U.S. Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\) Drug Product Labeling.](#)

As of February 2025, the FDA has approved naltrexone, acamprosate, and disulfiram for AUD treatment.

### Naltrexone

- Reduces craving and reward by blocking mu opioid receptors, dampening alcohol's reinforcement.
- Available as oral tablet and as a monthly extended-released intramuscular injection.
- Contraindications include current or recent opioid use, acute opioid withdrawal, acute hepatitis or liver failure, or allergy to naltrexone.<sup>6,7</sup>

### Acamprosate

- Reduces craving by restoring glutamate-GABA balance.
- Available as oral medication.
- Contraindications include prior hypersensitivity and severe renal impairment.<sup>8</sup>

### Disulfiram

- Blocks aldehyde dehydrogenase, causing aversive acetaldehyde to build up.
- Available as oral medication.
- Boxed warning: Disulfiram must not be given to intoxicated patients or without their full knowledge; relatives should be informed.<sup>9</sup>
- Contraindications include recent metronidazole, paraldehyde, or alcohol use, myocardial disease, psychosis, or hypersensitivity to disulfiram/thiuram derivatives.<sup>9</sup>

Professional societies and addiction specialists may also recommend the use of other medications off-label for AUD treatment.<sup>10</sup>

## Tips to Help Adults Drink Less

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers tips to help improve health and well-being. These tips help adults make a plan to drink less alcohol. [You can share these tips with the patients you serve to encourage less drinking.](#)

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### Additional Resources

- For more information on medications approved for AUD, please visit the [Providers Clinical Support System – Medications for AUD \(PCSS-MAUD\) Website.](#)
- For more data on excessive alcohol use and its related harms in NC, please visit the [NC Alcohol and Related Harms Data Dashboard.](#)
- For general information and prevention strategies to reduce excessive alcohol use and its related harms, please visit the [North Carolina Alcohol and Related Harms Prevention Website.](#)

### References

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