

# Commentary: How Texas churches can help prevent alcohol abuse

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Alcohol is the primary drug of abuse in Texas. Of particular concern is the heavy consumption of alcohol, referred to as “binge drinking,” drinking five or more drinks at one time.



Denise George More than half of Texas secondary school students in grades 7-12 have used alcohol, and 11 percent admit engaging in binge drinking. Alcohol consumption is much higher among Texas high school students in grades 9-12, with 73 percent claiming alcohol use, and high percentages of them drinking to drunkenness and binge drinking. Six and a half percent of Texans age 12 and older are alcohol dependent or past abusers.

Nationwide, an estimated 17 million Americans age 18 and older have had an alcohol-use disorder.

Alcohol and substance abuse in Texas costs the state more than \$25 billion annually. Substance abuse also causes increased rates of divorce, domestic

violence, child abuse, alcoholism-fueled sexual assault and drunk driving. In 2014, Texas led the nation in deaths caused by drunk drivers, with 39.5 percent of all traffic accident deaths in Texas involving alcohol.

Many people view alcoholism as a moral failing instead of a disease. They often—unsuccessfully—depend upon willpower alone to overcome the addiction. Recovery from alcoholism requires professional treatment and medical monitoring provided by substance abuse withdrawal/treatment facilities.

While alcohol ranks No. 1 in substance abuse in Texas and is cheap and readily available, other top substances abused are methamphetamine made in Mexico and heroin.

The average age of heroin overdose deaths in Texas declined from 41 years in 2005 to 36 years in 2013. Substance abuse poisoning victims also are becoming younger.

### **How to help**

Alcohol abuse in Texas is causing destruction, devastation and death to individuals, families, congregations and communities. Sitting in church pews each week are Christians who are “closet” alcoholics. Ashamed of their helplessness to conquer the disease themselves, they often forego treatment to keep their alcoholism hidden.

How can Texas pastors and church leaders recognize, address and help prevent alcohol abuse? Here are some suggestions:

- Observe [Substance-Abuse Prevention Sunday, March 19](#). Preach on substance abuse from the pulpit. Invite guest speakers from treatment agencies, as well as recovered alcoholics to give information and/or testimonies.

- Ask medical professionals from the community to explain and educate your congregation about alcohol use and substance poisoning in workshops, classes and church-sponsored seminars.
- Teach church leaders, especially those who work with children and youth, to recognize the symptoms of alcohol and substance abuse. (See “Recognizing the Symptoms” below.)
- Encourage women’s ministries and young couples’ class leaders in your church to address the issue. (See “Higher Alcohol Risks for Women” below.)
- Research, check out and make a list of qualified health-care providers and drug/alcohol treatment centers in your area. Keep updated information available for emergencies and referrals. (See “Helpful Resources” below.)
- Work with community leaders and local agencies that offer treatment and help for substance abusers.

### **Recognizing the symptoms**

Here are a few common signs of alcohol abuse and dependence:

- Repeatedly neglecting responsibilities at home, work and school. Problems with a boss, spouse or child.
- Using alcohol in situations that are physically dangerous, such as driving, operating machinery, etc.
- Getting arrested for driving while intoxicated and/or disorderly conduct and other legal problems stemming from alcohol use.
- Using alcohol as a way to de-stress and relax; depending on alcohol to cope with stressful situations.

- Lying to others and/or hiding drinking habits.
- “Blacking out” or forgetting what happened during drinking.
- Denial of a drinking problem or dependence.

Some common physical symptoms of alcohol withdrawal are:

- Depression and fatigue
- Appetite loss
- Anxiety, shakiness, trembling, sweating
- Insomnia
- Irritability and headaches
- Nausea and vomiting
- In some cases, hallucinations, confusion, seizures, fever, etc.

### **Higher alcohol risks for women**

While men are more likely to drink and binge drink, women today are drinking more, and more often, than in the past. High alcohol consumption poses unique risks to women.

They are more vulnerable to alcohol’s harmful effects, including:

- Liver disease
- Brain damage
- Osteoporosis—thinning of the bones
- Infertility and miscarriages

- High blood pressure and heart disease
- Premature menopause
- Breast cancer
- Mental and physical birth defects for unborn babies of pregnant women.

Physicians and public health officials recommend women avoid drinking any alcohol during pregnancy, since any amount can harm a developing fetus.

### **Helpful Resources**

- [The National Alcoholism Center](#): phone (888) 515-7704.
- ERLC's Substance Abuse Sunday [free, downloadable bulletin insert](#).
- [LifeWay Christian Resources](#) offers material on alcoholism and substance abuse.
- The [website for the Texas Department of Health and Human Services](#) and its hotline (800) 647-6558.

For further education:  
<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/addiction/substance-abuse-and-mental-health.htm>;  
<https://www.helpguide.org/harvard/how-addiction-hijacks-the-brain.htm>;  
<https://www.helpguide.org/harvard/women-and-alcohol.htm>.

*Denise George, author of 30 books, is co-author of the new Penguin Random House book: The Lost Eleven: The Forgotten Story of Black American Soldiers Brutally Massacred in World War II. She is married to Timothy George, founding dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University.*

