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## Addiction Medicine & Psychiatry



### A Test to Tell if You are Really an Alcoholic

If you suspect that your husband might be on the way to becoming an alcoholic, here is an idea for you: The next time he puts you off buy saying “I wish there were some simple test I could take to prove to you that I don’t have a drinking problem,” respond by saying: “Honey, there is. It’s called the two-drinks-a-day test.”

Here is the test:

The test, by the way, works equally well for men and women. Some people do this test every couple of years to prove to themselves that they are still on safe ground.

Direction #1: Together, you and your husband figure out what his favorite drink is. Let’s say his name is Jack, and he likes beer.

Direction #2: Agree that for the next 60 days Jack will have exactly two beers a day. No more, no less! That’s regardless of whether he gets promoted or fired; wins the big lottery or loses on the horses; your kid graduates with honors or dies in a car wreck.

He can’t skip days or “bank” drinks ahead for a later day. Why not? Because alcoholics find it easier not to drink at all than to have two drinks – and then stop. They fear that “after one drink, I might be off and running again.” Even early-stage alcoholics tend to use alcohol as a medication to help them handle mood swings and stressful situations. They drink because they feel good . . . or because they feel bad; to celebrate . . . or to mourn; when things work out . . . or when things don’t work out.

Direction #3: To make the test valid – and this is crucial – you both have to agree that you will talk seriously, at least 10 minutes a day, about the feelings, conversations and problems that arise in conjunction with the test. You may even keep a test diary.

Here are some crises scenarios.

One Saturday morning Jack practically inhales two beers at a celebrity brunch because “Phony people make me nervous.” By evening he is edgy, irritable and bored. “It’s Saturday night,” he complains, “and we’ve got nothing to do. I could really use those drinks now.”

The next morning he is angry. “Darn it,” he fumes, “I should never have agreed to do this stupid test in January. Do you realize what day this is? It’s Super Bowl Sunday! How can I watch the Super Bowl on two beers?”

Actually, the day goes surprisingly well. You are filled with admiration as you watch him white-knuckle his two beers all afternoon. Such control! Such willpower! But in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter, when the game goes into overtime, you are disappointed and your friends are embarrassed at his sudden temper outburst. Apparently, a Super Bowl in overtime . . . with no beer . . . is just about the end of the world.

A week later there is another crisis. Your husband has just drained the last delicious drop of his daily beer ration when your mother pulls into your driveway unexpectedly. Jack’s reaction is anger.

Like a good co-dependent, you try to calm him down. “Honey, I’ll make some coffee,” you say sweetly.

“No,” he waves you off. “There is only one thing to do,” he grumbles. “In about three minutes I’m gonna set off my beeper and get out of here.”

You are surprised. True, your mother can be difficult. But he’s always handled her visits with ease. Now you realize why: Usually she’d be talking, you’d be listening and he’d be drinking. Now you wonder: Does this mean that he “needs” alcohol to be around your mother?

As his beeper goes off, you feel relieved. Well, you say to yourself, at least one of my problems, namely my alcoholic, is gone for a while. Oops? You wonder. Was this a Freudian slip of the mind? Does this mean that Jack is really an alcoholic?

Nah, I must not jump to any premature conclusions. The 60 days are not up yet. Come to think of it, though, our “talks” are not going very well. There is so much evasion, forgetting, blaming and rationalization. It seems like we’re always talking about drinking or we’re talking about not drinking – or we’re talking about not drinking.

Such ups and downs, depending on how far advanced the problem is, will continue. On the 60<sup>th</sup> day Jack is very proud, and both of you are greatly relieved, that he has passed the test. That afternoon he phones you: “Sweetie, I’m stopping off at happy hour with some of the guys from the office. They want to ‘celebrate’ my passing the test. Actually,” he says, laughing, “they think this whole thing was a joke. But I don’t. Seriously, darling. I’m glad that you and I finally know that alcohol is not our problem. I’ll be home in time for dinner.”

But he doesn’t come home for dinner. At 10 p.m., you finally get a call. The call is from the police station. Jack is in jail. He’s been charged with drunk driving and assaulting the arresting officers.

P.S. By the way, this test works equally well for men and women. Also, I have treated a number of recovering alcoholics who, for many years, repeated that test every couple of years just to prove to themselves that they were still on safe ground.

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