

Cost of Alcohol Use Disorder Treatment Versus Untreated Alcohol Use Disorder

Cost of Untreated Alcohol Use Disorder

Alcohol use disorder (AUD) is a widespread chronic condition with significant societal and individual costs. In the United States, untreated AUD contributes to numerous health problems, including:



Liver Disease



Cardiovascular Issues



Cancer



Injuries Resulting from Alcohol-related Accidents

While treating AUD with medications and therapy has costs, untreated AUD imposes even greater financial burdens on individuals and society, including:



Lost Productivity



Increased Healthcare Expenses



Legal Fees

These challenges highlight the importance of treatment, which can improve health, quality of life, and financial well-being.

Cost of Treating Alcohol Use Disorder

Pharmacologic Treatments: Many health insurance plans, including Medicaid and Medicare, cover some or all costs of medications for alcohol use disorder (MAUD). Out-of-pocket expenses vary by insurance, dosing, pharmacy benefits, and cost-sharing. Patients should check their benefits summary or contact their insurer to confirm coverage and limitations. Low-cost pharmaceutical programs or prescription discounts may also help reduce costs.

Approximate Out-of-Pocket Expenses for MAUD Without Insurance Coverage:

Acamprosate: \$200-\$300 per month. ^{1,2}	Intramuscular naltrexone: \$1,400 per injection which is administered monthly. ²
Disulfiram: \$80-\$104 per month. ^{1,2}	Oral naltrexone: \$110 per month. ²
Gabapentin: \$150 per month. ^{1,2}	Topiramate: \$150 per month. ^{1,2}

Except for intramuscular naltrexone, all MAUD are generic medications, thus making them more affordable and accessible to patients.

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Non-pharmacologic Treatments:

Similar to pharmacologic treatments, the price of non-pharmacologic treatments varies depending on insurance coverage, location, and type of treatment, among other factors. These factors should be considered when determining a treatment plan. Patients should review their summary of benefits and coverage or contact their health insurance plan to confirm coverage and any coverage limitations.

Psychotherapy (including via telehealth)



The cost ranges greatly depending on the provider and type of therapy, but typically ranges between \$65-\$200 per session.³

Inpatient & Outpatient AUD Treatment



The cost varies significantly depending on location, length of stay, level of care provided, types of services offered, and insurance coverage. Some health insurance plans will cover partial, most, or even all outpatient and/or inpatient treatment expenses.

Community Recovery Programs



Recovery groups or programs such as [Alcoholics Anonymous](#), [SMART Recovery](#), or [Secular Organizations for Sobriety](#) are free to attend and available to anyone who would like to participate, regardless of medical diagnosis or insurance coverage.

Costs of Untreated Alcohol Use Disorder



Direct Costs:



Purchasing
Alcohol



Healthcare
Costs



ED Visits and
Hospitalization



Legal Issues/Motor
Vehicle Accidents

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Purchasing Alcohol

According to the United States Bureau of Economic Analysis, in 2023, \$221.8 billion was spent on alcohol at liquor or grocery stores.⁴ This equates to \$1,250.99 per person (177.3 million people ages 12+ reporting drinking alcohol in 2023⁵⁻⁶) spent on alcohol to be consumed off-premises.



Healthcare Costs

Alcohol use is a major contributor to healthcare costs, with \$27 billion spent on alcohol-related healthcare in 2010 and \$249 billion when considering crime, lost work productivity, and healthcare combined.⁷ By 2020, alcohol accounted for 36% of Medicaid substance use claims, totaling over \$129 million.⁷ People with alcohol use disorder are at higher risk for liver and heart disease, as well as certain cancers, including breast cancer, which costs nearly \$150 million annually in medical care.⁸ Untreated AUD leads to increased healthcare costs, with one study indicating that AUD raises healthcare costs by \$14,918 per year for those with commercial insurance and \$4,823 for Medicaid-insured patients due to conditions like stroke, heart disease, liver disease, and cancer.⁸



Emergency Department Visits and Hospitalizations

Individuals with AUD are at greater risk for unintentional accidents and injuries. Between January 2021 and September 2023, there were more than 8.5 million emergency department (ED) visits related to alcohol, which is twice the number of visits related to cannabis or opioids.⁹ Alcohol-related ED visits are the most expensive mental health or substance use disorder (MSUD) ED visits, averaging \$610 per patient per visit, which accounted for 21.7% of the \$5,616 million total MSUD ED visits costs in 2017.¹⁰ In that same year, alcohol use disorder cost \$7.6 billion in ED and inpatient hospital encounters.¹⁰



Legal Issues and Motor Vehicle Accidents

AUD can increase the risk of driving under the influence (DUI) and/or public disturbances while intoxicated. The cost of a first-time DUI varies greatly from state to state but averages about \$6,500, including court fines, bail, attorney fees, court-mandated classes, and public transportation if a license is suspended.¹¹ Additionally, a DUI may incur expenses for potential car repairs, medical expenses associated with healthcare needs related to the accident, and increased insurance premiums.¹¹ Furthermore, lost wages average \$4,400 while dealing with the consequences of a DUI.¹¹

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Indirect Costs:



**Lost
Productivity**



**Family and
Social Costs**



**Shorter Life Expectancy
and Loss of Life**



Lost Productivity

Alcohol use disorder can lead to poor or decreased job performance and absenteeism. This can appear as calling out or skipping work and/or performing work responsibilities poorly due to intoxication and/or dealing with the consequences of drinking (e.g., hangovers, retrieving lost items). Alcohol use disorder is linked to 232 million missed workdays per year for full-time employees.¹²



Family and Social Costs

Alcohol use disorder can negatively impact interpersonal relationships, causing strained relations and distress for both the individual with the disease as well as for the family and friends of the individual.¹³ This can result in additional direct costs, such as family or individual therapy for all involved parties. AUD can also result in personal embarrassment or shame of actions while intoxicated and/or recovering from intoxication, creating social tensions.



Shorter Life Expectancy and Loss of Life

Alcohol is a leading cause of morbidity and mortality,¹⁴ and reduced life expectancy.¹⁵ Each year, approximately 178,000 people in the United States die from excessive drinking.¹⁶ Excessive alcohol consumption - classified as heavy and/or binge drinking - reduces life expectancy by an average of 24 years, resulting in about 4 million years of potential life lost.¹⁶ Alcohol-related deaths are from both chronic conditions as a result of drinking and from acute incidents such as motor vehicle crashes (which may involve innocent bystanders), overdose, or death by suicide.¹⁶

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Cost-effectiveness of AUD Treatment

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the direct and indirect costs of excessive drinking total:¹⁷



About \$807 per person in the United States annually.



This equates to \$2.05 in economic costs per drink to address the alcohol-related impacts.

Treating alcohol use disorder requires direct costs, which can range from free to thousands of dollars. However, treatment results in potential cost savings such as:



Lower Medical Expenses



Improved Health Outcomes



Fewer Accidents and Injuries



Improved Quality of Life



Increased Productivity



Improved Interpersonal Relationships



Less Crime and Legal Costs



Reduced Hospital and Emergency Visits

Funding Statement

Funding for this initiative was made possible by cooperative agreement No. 1H79TI086771-01 from SAMHSA. The views expressed in written conference materials or publications and by speakers and moderators do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the Department of Health and Human Services; nor does mention of trade names, commercial practices, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

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