



Is Alcoholism Inherited?

Many studies have shown that children of alcoholics are three to five times more likely to become alcoholics than children of nonalcoholic parents. Does this mean that a tendency toward alcoholism can be inherited? Researchers don't know for sure.

Nature or Nurture?

Both heredity and environment may influence whether a person becomes an alcoholic. Researchers are still wondering which is most important—the biological status of a person's parents, or the way in which the person was raised. Unfortunately, the results of their studies have been confusing. Many alcoholics have no known alcoholic relatives and many children of alcoholics don't become alcoholic. Yet children of alcoholics who are adopted into nonalcoholic homes at an early age are more likely to become alcoholics than children of nonalcoholics who are adopted into alcoholic homes.

Studies Disagree

Researchers disagree about the meanings of recent findings. Some say that certain studies on alcoholism may not be reliable because they depend on alcoholics' own descriptions of themselves. Some say that research involving adoptive children is inadequate because it did not study nonadoptive children in order to determine how being adopted might affect the development of alcoholism. Others say that not enough attention has been paid to environmental factors, such as the age at which the child was adopted, the occupational status of the adoptive parents and whether the parents condoned adult drunkenness.

Physical Differences

What does seem clear is that children of alcoholics are physically different from children of nonalcoholics. Differences are shown in brain wave patterns and hormone responses to intoxication. In addition, children of alcoholics report feeling less intoxicated after drinking a certain amount of alcohol than children of nonalcoholics. Some researchers believe that feeling less intoxicated may contribute to heavy drinking habits. Whether a tendency toward alcoholism can be inherited, these differences suggest that children of alcoholics should be especially careful about whether and how they drink.

