

# Alcohol Withdrawal Syndrome

## Alcohol Withdrawal Syndrome

Alcohol withdrawal syndrome generally affects people who have a regular drinking pattern and then suddenly stop drinking or using alcohol.

Alcohol withdrawal syndrome is a cluster of symptoms that can range from mild to severe to life-threatening.

Alcohol depresses the central nervous system, slowing activity of nerve cells. Alcohol disrupts the process that tells nerve cells to become excited. Instead, nerve cells become restrained. During withdrawal, the activity of the nerve cells comes back. The central nervous system can become overactivated. This causes withdrawal symptoms.

Your symptoms will depend on how much you drank and for how long. Risks of withdrawal increase if you have certain health problems such as liver disease (cirrhosis), pancreas disease (pancreatitis) or respiratory problems.

## Mild to Moderate Withdrawal

The following symptoms can begin 1 to 8 hours after your last drink.

- shaking (tremors)
- headache
- being unable to sleep (insomnia)
- anxiety

- agitation
- irritability
- loss of appetite
- upset stomach (nausea)
- throwing up (vomiting)
- problems concentrating
- sweating
- seeing and hearing things that do not exist. (hallucinations). Hallucinations may appear 10 to 30 hours after the last drink.

Mild symptoms may begin to go away about 2 days after your last drink.

## Major Withdrawal

The following symptoms can begin 2 to 4 days after your last drink.

- seizures
- hallucinations
- delirium tremens (DTs). These signs can last between 1 and 4 days after withdrawal symptoms start:
  - disorientation and confusion
  - hallucinations
  - severe agitation
  - rapid heart and breathing rates
  - high blood pressure
  - fever.

*(over)*

## What Your Health Care Provider Will Do

Your health care provider will want to give you a physical exam. The exam will look for other health problems that could develop as a result of heavy alcohol use such as:

- irregular heartbeat or heart disease
- liver disease
- pancreas disease
- infectious disease (can be spread)
- bleeding in the digestive tract (stomach, intestines or esophagus)
- problems with the central nervous system
- inflammation of the stomach lining.

You may need to receive fluids through an intravenous (IV) line in your arm if you are dehydrated (loss of fluids, minerals and vitamins).

## Treatment

The health care team will determine what type of treatment is best. You may need therapy, medicine or both.

- **Therapy.** Your health care provider may order an evaluation by a substance abuse counselor. You may also benefit from relaxation therapy or biofeedback.
- **Medicine.** There are several medicines used to treat the symptoms of alcohol withdrawal syndrome. Your health care provider will choose the right medicine(s) for you.
  - benzodiazepines. These sedatives are used to treat anxiety, insomnia and seizures. They can be given many times over several hours. Their effects can last for several days and reduce the risk of rebound symptoms later during withdrawal. There are also short-acting benzodiazepines. Common medicines are diazepam (Valium<sup>®</sup>), chlordiazepoxide (Librium<sup>®</sup>) and lorazepam (Ativan<sup>®</sup>).

- beta blockers (heart medicine) to slow heart rate and lower blood pressure
- antipsychotic medicines to manage hallucinations
- antiseizure medicine to manage seizures.

## For Your Care Circle (Family, Friends and Others Close to You)

This is a time when you can provide great support.

- Give the health care team detailed information about the person's alcohol use. Include the amount of type of alcohol as well as how often he or she drank.
- Support the person by giving him or her plenty of rest. Keep visitors to a minimum and do not let visitors stay too long.
- Talk with other care circle member for emotional support.
- Take good care of yourself. Get plenty of rest, eat healthful foods and be physically active.

Alcohol withdrawal syndrome symptoms may last a few days or longer. The health care team will monitor the person and give treatment as needed. Talk with the health care team if you have any questions.

## Information adapted from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.