

Alcohol Withdrawal Syndrome

Dealing with serious alcohol withdrawal problems

What is alcohol withdrawal syndrome?

Alcohol withdrawal syndrome is a set of symptoms that people have when they suddenly stop drinking after using alcohol for a long time. Some people have mild shakiness and sweats. Some people hallucinate—they hear and see things that don't exist. The worst form of withdrawal is called "DTs" (delirium tremens). DTs can be very serious if not treated by a doctor.

Withdrawal symptoms rarely occur in people who only drink once in a while. Symptoms usually occur in people who have been drinking heavily for weeks or months and then suddenly stop drinking. People who have gone through withdrawal before are more likely to have withdrawal symptoms each time they quit drinking.

Do people in withdrawal need to see a doctor?

Most people in withdrawal don't need to see a doctor. People who have had a bad withdrawal before should see a doctor. People who have other illnesses such as infections, heart disease, lung disease or a history of seizures should see a doctor if they begin to have serious withdrawal symptoms. People who are quitting other drugs (tobacco, injected drugs or cocaine) at the same time they stop drinking alcohol might have severe withdrawal problems. They should see a doctor first.

What can a doctor do to help people in withdrawal?

Medicines can control the shakiness, anxiety and confusion that come with alcohol withdrawal. Only a doctor can prescribe these medicines. If you take the medicines at an early stage, they may keep your symptoms from getting worse. Most people don't have to be hospitalized.

What can family and friends do to help people going through withdrawal?

It's important that people going through withdrawal have a quiet, safe place to stay until the withdrawal is over. The urge to drink again during withdrawal can be very strong. Some people may put themselves into dangerous situations. After withdrawal feelings go away, it's important that the person join a treatment program or sobriety program, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Support from family and friends can help a person find success in these programs.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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8880 Ward Parkway, Kansas City, MO 64114-2797
<http://www.aafp.org>

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