

ALCOHOL WITHDRAWAL

When a person with alcoholism stops drinking, withdrawal symptoms begin within 6 to 48 hours and peak about 24 to 35 hours after the last drink. During this period the inhibition of brain activity caused by alcohol is abruptly reversed. Stress hormones are over-produced and the central nervous system becomes over-excited. About 5% of alcoholics experiences delirium tremens (DT's), which usually develops two to four days after the last drink. Symptoms of the DT's include fever, rapid heart beat, either high or low blood pressure, extremely aggressive behavior, hallucinations, and other mental disturbances. A person experiencing withdrawal symptoms should consult with a physician or seek treatment at a hospital.

Upon entering a hospital, the individual is given a physical examination for any injuries or medical conditions and will be treated for any potentially serious problems, such as high blood pressure or irregular heartbeat. The immediate goal of treatment is to calm the person as quickly as possible. Patients are usually given one of the anti-anxiety drugs know as benzodiazepines, which relieve withdrawal symptoms and help prevent progression to delirium tremens. An injection of the B vitamin thiamine may be given to prevent Wernick-Karsakoff syndrome. Patients should be observed for at least two hours to determine the severity of withdrawal symptoms. Physicians may use assessment test, such as the Clinical Institute Withdrawal Assessment Scale (CIWA), to help determine treatment and whether the symptoms will progress in severity. Older people with alcoholism are not a higher risk for more sever symptoms than younger people, but they may suffer more complications during withdrawal, including delirium, falls, and a decreased ability to perform normal activities.

About 95% of people have mild to moderate withdrawal symptoms, including agitation, trembling, disturbed sleep, and lack of appetite. In 15% to 20% of people with moderate symptoms, brief seizures and hallucinations may occur, but they do not progress to full-blown delirium tremens. Such individuals can nearly always be treated as outpatients. After being examined and observed, the person is usually sent home with a limited supply of anti-anxiety medication, scheduled for follow-up and rehabilitation, and advised to return to the emergency room if withdrawal symptoms become severe. If possible a family member or friend should support the person through the next few days of withdrawal.

People with symptoms of delirium tremens must be treated immediately. Untreated delirium tremens has a fatality rate that can be as high as 20%. They are usually first given intravenous anti-anxiety medications and their physical condition is stabilized. It is extremely important that fluids be administered. Restraints may be necessary to prevent injury to themselves or others. Delirium tremens are more common in people with a long history of alcohol use and a prior history of significant withdrawal.

A person who is withdrawing from alcohol with sever liver damage is at risk of developing high ammonia levels due to the liver's inability to metabolize the ethanol from the system. A person experiencing this ammonia poisoning will become very confused, agitated and it is often noted by a sever incidence of a "dirty tennis shoe" odor to their breath. This is a fatal complication that requires immediate treatment.

Opiates

When people hear “opiates,” they often think “heroin.” It is true that one of the most addictive and dangerous drugs in the opiate category is heroin, but there is more to this category that must be noted. Opiates are considered to be any substance derived from poppy seed flowers and can be synthesized in laboratories. Opiate medications include painkillers such as morphine, Vicoden and Oxycontin.

Opiates work on the central nervous system of the body, and affect the brain and nervous system. The human brain produces neurotransmitters called endorphins, which manage the pain and pleasure areas of the body. When taken as prescribed and for a short period of time, opiates will not interfere with the creation and transmission of natural endorphins. However over a prolonged period of time taking these painkillers, the body stops making endorphins all together, expecting that they will be coming in from outside sources. This is why it is important to always have a doctor carefully monitoring opiate use, even when prescribed.

The majority of times, opiates are prescribed by doctors and physicians to treat pain – common uses are for pain after dentistry or other surgical procedures. Opiates like oxycontin are prescribed for people with cancer undergoing long and painful treatment.

If you are concerned about your own increased opiate use, or are worried about someone close to you, there are signs of opiate addiction you can watch for:

- Increased tolerance to prescription painkillers.
- Unsuccessful attempts to quit or control use.
- Withdrawal symptoms when the body suddenly stops receiving the drug.
- Insomnia and dramatic increases in sleepiness and sleeplessness.
- Mood swings, increased irritability, anxiety. Feeling numb or disconnected when the drug is ingested.

Usually a person addicted to opiates will at first believe they have their addiction under control, or think they can stop at any time – just not right now. There are usually great justifications for continued use and reasons for all behavioral, mental and physical changes – an addict will always try and protect their secret.

Opiate withdrawal is extremely hard on the body and mind. Many people become addicts because they are on a constant quest to avoid the hard effects of withdrawal. In order to get to the point of withdrawal after stopping opiates, the opiates have to be taken over an extended period of time. If taken as prescribed by a doctor for initial pain management after surgery or if taken recreationally once, withdrawal symptoms can be avoided. If taken more consistently and a tolerance is built up, a professional detoxification in a hospital setting is recommended for the safest and most comfortable method possible.