

Alcohol Withdrawal Syndrome

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 period of time. Some people have mild shakiness and sweats. Some people hallucinate (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?

Yes. Your doctor needs to know you're going through withdrawal so he or she can make sure it doesn't lead to more serious health problems. If you go through withdrawal a number of times without getting the right treatment, your symptoms may get worse each time. So even if your withdrawal symptoms don't seem that bad, it's important to see your doctor. This is especially true for people who have had a bad withdrawal before and people who have other health problems, such as infections, heart disease, lung disease or a history of seizures.

People who quit using other drugs (such as tobacco, injected drugs or cocaine) at the same time they stop drinking alcohol might have severe withdrawal problems. They should see a doctor before they quit.

What can a doctor do to help people in withdrawal?

A doctor can keep track of withdrawal symptoms so that more serious health problems don't develop. He or she can also give emotional support.

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 of the withdrawal, they may keep your symptoms from getting worse. Most people in withdrawal don't need to be hospitalized.

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

It's important for people going through withdrawal to 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 symptoms go away, it's important for the person to join a treatment or sobriety program, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). To find an AA group in your area, check the phone book or visit www.aa.org. Support from family and friends can help a person find success in one of these programs.

(Created 9/00) (Updated 11/02)

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.