

Alcohol Withdrawal Syndrome

Alcohol withdrawal syndrome is a group of symptoms that can develop when a person who drinks heavily and regularly stops drinking or drinks less. Alcohol withdrawal syndrome can be mild or severe, and it may even be life-threatening.

Alcohol withdrawal syndrome usually affects people who have alcohol use disorder, which may also be called alcoholism. Alcohol use disorder is when a person is unable to control his or her alcohol use, and drinking too much or too often causes problems at home, at work, or in relationships.

What are the causes?

Drinking heavily and drinking on a regular basis cause changes in brain chemistry. Over time, the body becomes dependent on alcohol. When alcohol use stops, the chemistry system in the brain becomes unbalanced and causes the symptoms of alcohol withdrawal.

What increases the risk?

Alcohol withdrawal syndrome is more likely to occur in people who drink more than the recommended limit of alcohol (2 drinks a day for men or 1 drink a day for non-pregnant women). It is also more likely to affect heavy drinkers who have been using alcohol for long periods of time. The more a person drinks and the longer he or she drinks, the greater the risk of alcohol withdrawal syndrome.

Severe withdrawal is more likely to develop in someone who:

- Had severe alcohol withdrawal in the past.
- Had a seizure during a previous episode of alcohol withdrawal.
- Is elderly.
- Uses other drugs.
- Has a long-term (*chronic*) medical problem, such as heart, lung, or liver disease.
- Has depression.
- Does not get enough nutrients from his or her diet (*malnutrition*).

What are the signs or symptoms?

Symptoms of this condition can be mild to moderate, or they can be severe. Symptoms may develop a few hours (or up to a day) after a person changes his or her drinking patterns. During the 48 hours after he or she has stopped drinking, the following symptoms may go away or get better:

- Uncontrollable shaking (*tremor*).
- Sweating.
- Headache.
- Anxiety.
- Inability to relax (*agitation*).
- Trouble sleeping (*insomnia*).
- Irregular heartbeats (*palpitations*).
- Alcohol cravings.
- Seizure.

The following symptoms may get worse 24–48 hours after a person has decreased or stopped alcohol use, and they may gradually improve over a period of days or weeks:

- Nausea and vomiting.
- Fatigue.
- Sensitivity to light and sounds.
- Confusion and inability to think clearly.
- Loss of appetite.
- Mood swings, irritability, depression, and anxiety.
- Insomnia and nightmares.

The following symptoms are severe and life-threatening. When these symptoms occur together, they are called delirium tremens (DTs):

- High blood pressure.
- Increased heart rate.
- Trouble breathing.
- Seizures. These may go away along with other symptoms, or they may persist.
- Seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, or tasting things that are not there (*hallucinations*). If you experience hallucinations, they usually begin 12–24 hours after a change in drinking patterns.

Delirium tremens requires immediate hospitalization.

How is this diagnosed?

This condition may be diagnosed based on:

- Your symptoms and medical history.
- Your history of alcohol use. Your health care provider may ask questions about your drinking behavior. It is important to be honest when you answer these questions.
- A psychological assessment.
- A physical exam.
- Blood tests or urine tests to measure blood alcohol level and to rule out other causes of symptoms.
- MRI or CT scan. This may be done if you seem to have abnormal thinking or behaviors (*altered mental status*).

Diagnosis can be difficult. People going through withdrawal often avoid seeking medical care and are not thinking clearly. Friends and family members play an important role in recognizing symptoms and encouraging loved ones to get treatment.

How is this treated?

Most people with symptoms of withdrawal can be treated outside of a hospital setting (*outpatient treatment*), with close monitoring such as daily check-ins with a health care provider and counseling. You may need treatment at a hospital or treatment center (*inpatient treatment*) if:

- You have a history of delirium tremens or seizures.
- You have severe symptoms.
- You are addicted to other drugs.
- You cannot swallow medicine.
- You have a serious medical condition such as heart failure.

- You experienced withdrawal in the past but then you continued drinking alcohol.
- You are not likely to commit to an outpatient treatment schedule.

Treatment may involve:

- Monitoring your blood pressure, pulse, and breathing.
- IV fluids to keep you hydrated.
- Medicines to reduce withdrawal symptoms and discomfort (*benzodiazepines*).
- Medicine to reduce anxiety.
- Medicine to prevent or control seizures.
- Multivitamins and B vitamins.
- Having a health care provider check on you daily.

It is important to get treatment for alcohol withdrawal early. Getting treatment early can:

- Speed up your recovery from withdrawal symptoms.
- Make you more successful with long-term stoppage of alcohol use (*sobriety*).

If you need help to stop drinking, your health care provider may recommend a long-term treatment plan that includes:

- Medicines to help treat alcohol use disorder.
- Substance abuse counseling.
- Support groups.

Follow these instructions at home:

- Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines (including vitamin supplements) only as told by your health care provider.
- **Do not** drink alcohol.
- **Do not** drive until your health care provider approves.
- Have someone you trust stay with you or be available if you need help with your symptoms or with not drinking.
- Drink enough fluid to keep your urine pale yellow.
- Consider joining an alcohol support group or treatment program. These can provide emotional support, advice, and guidance.
- Keep all follow-up visits as told by your health care provider. This is important.



Contact a health care provider if:

- Your symptoms get worse instead of better.
- You cannot eat or drink without vomiting.
- You are struggling with not drinking alcohol.
- You cannot stop drinking alcohol.

Get help right away if:

- You have an irregular heartbeat.
- You have chest pain.
- You have trouble breathing.
- You have a seizure for the first time.

- You hallucinate.
- You become very confused.

Summary

- Alcohol withdrawal is a group of symptoms that can develop when a person who drinks heavily and regularly stops drinking or drinks less.
- Symptoms of this condition can be mild to moderate, or they can be severe.
- Treatment may include hospitalization, medicine, and counseling.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

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