Alcohol Withdrawal, Delirium Tremens (DT's)

Alcohol withdrawal happens when a person suddenly stops drinking alcohol after a period of heavy drinking. While cases differ, alcohol withdrawal symptoms may develop after consuming more than 2-3 drinks every day for several days or weeks. When a person drinks this way, their body becomes used to (*dependent* upon) having alcohol in their system. When they stop drinking or reduce how much they drink, the symptoms they experience are known as alcohol withdrawal syndrome (AWS).

CAUSES

The cause of AWS is due to the changes that occur in the brain, especially to important chemical messengers called *neurotransmitters*. When a person suddenly quits or greatly reduces the amount of alcohol they drink, the balance of these brain chemicals get disturbed.

SYMPTOMS

- Fast heart rate.
- Elevated temperature.
- High blood pressure.
- Seizures.
- Tremors.
- Sweating.
- Fast breathing.
- Anxiety.
- Lack of coordination.
- Trouble thinking clearly.
- Nausea.

Many people keep drinking to get rid of this discomfort and to try to feel normal.

Symptoms can be divided into 4 categories:

- *Minor withdrawal* (withdrawal shakiness). This occurs within 6-24 hours after the last drink. It is characterized by shakiness, anxiety, nausea, vomiting and problems sleeping.
- *Major withdrawal.* This occurs 10-72 hours after the last drink. A person may see or hear things that are not real (*hallucinations*). Other symptoms include full body shaking, vomiting, sweating and high blood pressure.
- *Withdrawal seizures* (rum fits). These occur within 6-48 hours of stopping alcohol. These are characterized by loss of consciousness, severe body shaking, frothing at the mouth and unusual eye movements. These spells occur during withdrawal in patients who do not normally have seizures or a seizure disorder like epilepsy. These seizures often last only a few minutes. Without medical treatment, multiple seizures occur in 60% of patients. Only a small number of patients go on to develop a more serious condition where the seizures do not stop. This is called *status epilepticus*. This is a serious, life-threatening medical emergency.
- An alcohol withdrawal seizure is often the first sign of alcohol withdrawal. No other signs of withdrawal may be present after the seizure stops.
- Delirium tremens (DTs) is the worst form of alcohol withdrawal. It occurs 3-10 days after the last drink. The patient often becomes severely agitated, confused, disorientated. They may suffer from hallucinations, fever, rapid heartbeat and high blood pressure.

DIAGNOSIS

- The diagnosis is usually made from the history of alcohol consumption and the presence of symptoms.
- Medical tests may be done to rule out other conditions that can act like alcohol withdrawal.

TREATMENT

- Fewer than half of alcohol-dependent persons develop any significant withdrawal symptoms that need treatment with medication when they stop drinking.
- Many patients can be treated outside of the hospital with medications that prevent withdrawal symptoms. They MUST be taken exactly as directed by the caregiver. Medicines are often gradually reduced over a period of several days or weeks.
- Patients who are seriously ill should be treated in a hospital. This is because death can result from sudden

stoppage of the heart or breathing. Measures to reverse the effects of chronic drinking are done. This includes the poisonous effect that alcohol has on the brain, liver, heart and other organs. Treatment of addiction to drugs other than alcohol is usually required. Often patients with alcohol issues suffer from other medical or psychiatric problems. These issues also need a diagnosis and treatment.

- While in the hospital, treatment often includes:
  - Thiamine. This can prevent a serious brain disorder. It is often given by injection once a day for several days.
  - Multivitamins and folate are often given to these patients.
  - Patients may be dehydrated and need fluids. These fluids are often given through an IV (a tube that goes into a vein in the arm).
  - Calcium, magnesium, phosphorous, and potassium must be replaced if too low.
  - Sedatives and other drugs may be used to treat symptoms of anxiety, agitation and sleep problems.

LENGTH OF ILLNESS

- Alcohol withdrawal can last from a few days up to many weeks or even a month or more.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

After treatment, you MUST:

- Follow all instructions from your caregiver very carefully.
- Take all medications as prescribed. If you cannot, call your caregiver right away.
- Keep all appointments for further evaluation and counseling.
- **Do not** use drugs, alcohol or any other mind or mood altering drugs.
- **Do not** operate a motor vehicle or hazardous machinery until your caregiver says it is okay.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You have a seizure (*convulsions*).
- You become very shaky or agitated.
- You have severe nausea and vomiting.
- You throw up blood. This may be bright red or look like black coffee grounds.
- You have blood in your stool. This may be bright red or appear as a black, tarry, bad smelling stool.
- You become light headed or faint.
- If you have any of the above symptoms, DO NOT DRIVE. Have someone else drive you or call for emergency services (911 in the U.S.).

PREVENTION

- Anyone who has experienced alcohol withdrawal should consider that alcoholism may be an issue. Professional evaluation is highly recommended.
- Although some people can recover without help, most need assistance. With treatment and support, many addicts are able to stop drinking and rebuild their lives. Long-term recovery is possible.
- **Addiction cannot be cured, but it can be treated successfully.** Treatment centers are listed in telephone book under:
  - Alcoholism and Addiction Treatment, Substance Abuse Treatment or Cocaine, Narcotics, and Alcoholics Anonymous. Most hospitals and clinics can refer you to a specialized care center.
- The US government maintains a toll-free number for getting treatment referrals: 1-800-662-4357 or 1-800-487-4889 (TDD). They also maintain a website: http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov. Other websites for more information are: www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov and www.nida.gov.
- In Canada, treatment resources are listed in each Province. Listings are available under:
  - The Ministry for Health Services or similar titles.

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