

*Patient Education Sheet***What is Alcohol Withdrawal?****What is alcohol withdrawal?**

Alcohol withdrawal is a set of symptoms that people have when they suddenly stop drinking after using alcohol for a long period of time. The more heavily the person has been drinking every day, the more likely that person will develop withdrawal symptoms when stopping.

However, some people will have difficulty withdrawing even when they use small amounts of alcohol regularly, such as one or two glasses of wine, beer or liquor daily. This is especially true if their liver or lungs are not healthy or if they become acutely ill, have a chronic condition and/or end up being hospitalized.

Do people withdrawing need a doctor?

1 in 4 persons admitted to the hospital in the US will have a problem with Alcohol withdrawal. Many individuals will have severe withdrawal symptoms or will die from alcohol abuse. When patients do not let their physician know that they drink regularly, patients can go into serious withdrawal. This is because staff are unaware of the potential for withdrawal and do not have the opportunity to prepare for the right treatment to avoid the severe symptoms.

It is critical to identify the risk of Alcohol withdrawal in order to allow timely treatment since symptoms can appear rapidly. They may develop as soon as 3 to 12 hours after admission, or as late as 2 to 4 days or more after admission.

If the preadmission use of alcohol is heavy and the pattern goes unrecognized and

untreated, withdrawal symptoms may be severe, characterized by delirium tremens (DTs) and /or seizures. No one can predict who will have a hard time going through withdrawal unless the patient already has a history of serious withdrawal.

Some people could have passed out at home and appear to be sleeping the effects of alcohol off; when in fact they may have had toxic amounts of the substance and may be gravely ill. Others may seem to be doing okay, having symptoms the family noticed before. But if they suddenly stop drinking for several days, they can rapidly begin to have serious symptoms which may require hospitalization to avoid further complications and deterioration.

Is it important to tell my physician about my alcohol drinking habits?

Anyone who sees a primary care physician, or who is hospitalized or is having an out-patient procedure should inform the physician or nurse, to the best of his/her ability, the following:

- ✓ Frequency of drinking: daily, weekend or less often
- ✓ Amount of alcohol intake each time: 1, 2, 3, 4, ...10 or more drinks
- ✓ The type or types of alcohol ingested: beer, wine, hard liquor
- ✓ The time of the last alcoholic drink: one hour ago, 12 hours or 2 days ago.

It is also important to inform the healthcare team of symptoms that may have occurred in the past when alcohol intake is suddenly stopped. It is also important to describe the experience, such as sweating, nervousness,

shakes, nausea, hallucinations, confusion or seizures.

What are the symptoms of withdrawal?

Mild to moderate psychological symptoms include:

- Shakiness—Tremulousness is the earliest symptom and may be seen 6-12 hours after last drink
- Excitability, jumpiness or nervousness
- Anxiety
- Rapid emotional changes
- Depression
- Fatigue
- Bad dreams
- Difficulty thinking clearly

Mild to moderate physical symptoms include:

- Headache—generally pulsating
- Sweating, especially the palms of the hands or face
- Nausea and vomiting
- Loss of appetite
- Insomnia
- Clammy skin
- Tremor of hands
- Involuntary or abnormal movements of the eyelids
- Rapid heart rate
- Eye pupils enlarged or dilated
- Pale skin color

Severe symptoms and signs include:

- Agitation
- Disorientation or confusion

- Hallucinations—seeing, hearing or feeling things that are not really there or happening
- Fever
- General body shaking
- Convulsions or seizures (may be major form like Grand mal or a milder form like Petite mal)
- Increase in temperature, heart rate, respirations, and blood pressure
- Abnormal heart rhythms
- Internal bleeding, especially GI bleed
- Liver failure
- Dehydration or low fluid volume

Source:

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Retrieved 3/2009 from www.niaaa.nih.gov

American Society of Addiction Medicine. Retrieved 3.2009 from www.asam.org

Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration. Retrieved 3/2009 from www.samhsa.gov

5/2013

For more information, or to learn about the specialized services and programs available at Western Connecticut Health Network, please visit www.WCHN.org