

*Patient Education Sheet***What are the Major Complications of Alcoholism?****What are the major complications for alcoholism?**

Alcoholism places you at risk for very dangerous and serious medical conditions. There are 3 major life threatening complications which are medical emergencies.

1. Alcohol withdrawal seizures:

- Most seizures occur within 24 to 48 hours, but they can also occur during delirium tremens.
- Seizures are not likely to occur if the patient receives adequate sedation and treatment early.
- Often a patient only experiences one episode of seizures. However, one episode of seizures can rapidly progress to “status epilepticus”. This means that the seizures do not readily stop and the patient experiences seizures rapidly, one after another with little time to recover in between. This serious condition may be hard to manage and treat effectively with current medications. There is a risk of exhaustion, respiratory failure, cardiac arrest and even death

2. Delirium Tremens (DTs):

- This is clouding of the consciousness (the patient becomes unaware of their surroundings and may be in a dream like state). Vivid hallucinations and confusion are experienced along with marked tremors.
- There is a 5% mortality rate usually due to cardiovascular collapse, low

body temperature or underlying infection.

- DTs usually last 3 to 5 days, but may last up to 4 weeks, especially when accompanied by chest infection/pneumonia.
- Key treatment includes avoiding dehydration; electrolyte imbalance, particularly potassium and magnesium; exhaustion; collapse and a sudden steep rise in body temperature.
- Symptoms generally start 24 to 50 hours after stopping drinking; and they often start at night when the room is unlit and shadowy.
- The patient often suffers from restlessness, insomnia and fear.
- Benzodiazepines and other medications are needed to manage this acute condition.
- Patients often receive intravenous or intramuscular thiamine for several days due to a deficit in most patients who drink excessively.

3. Wernick’s encephalopathy:

- The mortality rate for this condition is 17 to 20% in the acute stage of illness.
- The condition results from poor intake or absorption of Thiamine.
- The onset is abrupt, and mental confusion and difficulty walking are often the first features.
- The patient experiences “Triad (3) Symptoms:” which consist of confusion (difficulty thinking), ataxia (difficulty walking) and eye abnormalities (swinging, pendulum-

like movement of eyeballs, causing a squint).

- The treatment is intravenous Thiamine.
- There is a small risk of shock, dehydration, and low magnesium.
- Once managed, oral Vitamin B should be continued for a number of weeks following discharge from the hospital .

Are there other symptoms related to alcoholism?

There are other risks for serious and chronic health conditions that occur due to excessive drinking. These conditions increase the risk for premature death, and include:

1. *Alcoholic cardiomyopathy*: The heart enlarges, which leads to weakening of the heart muscle with failure to pump blood sufficiently. This condition leads to heart failure and premature death.
2. *Alcoholic dementia*: Excessive alcohol use overtime causes the loss of neurons or brain cells, leading to cognitive deficits such as memory problems, poor judgment and inability to care for self safely. It also has social complications, including loss of job and the need for nursing home placement.
3. *Other chronic conditions* which left untreated and thus can also contribute to premature death or nursing home placement are: High blood pressure, diabetes, anemia, malnutrition, skin ulcers that do not heal, GI bleed which may require transfusions, pancreatitis and liver failure.

4. *Alcohol poisoning*: This is the most life-threatening consequence of binge drinking. When someone drinks too much and gets alcohol poisoning, it affects the body's involuntary reflexes, which include breathing and the gag reflexes. If the gag reflex is not working properly, a person can choke to death on his or her vomit.

Other signs someone may have alcohol poisoning include:

- Extreme confusion
- Inability to be awakened
- Vomiting
- Seizures
- Slow or irregular breathing
- Low body temperature
- Bluish or pale skin

If you think someone has alcohol poisoning, call 911 immediately.

Source:

National Library of Medicine/ Medline Plus. Retrieved March 2009 from <http://medlineplus.gov>

US dept of Health & Human Services. April 2003. Substance Abuse in Brief. www.samhsa.gov

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