Reintegration

Recovery

Medication-Assisted Treatment for Alcohol Dependence

DEFENSE CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE
For Psychological Health & Traumatic Brain Injury

VA/DoD Evidence-Based Practice

How do you free yourself from the stress and risks of alcohol dependence?

Most people cannot do it alone. They need help to return to normal, healthy living. One important form of help is called medication-assisted treatment.

This form of treatment has three, equally important parts:

- Medicine
- Talk therapy
- Support from family and friends

Alcohol dependence can be treated

A person with alcohol dependence can regain a full and healthy life. Alcohol dependence can be a **chronic disease**, like heart disease or diabetes. A chronic disease is a medical condition a person has for his or her entire life. It cannot be cured, but it can be managed.

Most people need help to change addictive behaviors into healthy behavior patterns. They can get this help with **treatment**—with the care of treatment providers. Treatment helps people to:

- Stop drinking
- Get through withdrawal and cope with cravings
- Address issues tied to the addiction, such as low self-worth, a bad work or home situation, or spending time with people who encourage alcohol or drug use
- Begin healthy, addiction-free lifestyles—a way of living referred to as **recovery**

Medication-assisted treatment is treatment for alcohol dependence that includes medication and other support. Medication-assisted treatment prevents relapse following successful withdrawal management, if necessary. For those who are addicted, medication can help them to:

- Regain a stable state of mind, free from alcohol-induced highs and lows
- Provide freedom from thinking about alcohol all the time
- Reduce problems of craving
- Focus on lifestyle changes that lead back to healthy living

Taking medication for dependence is like taking medication to treat any other medical condition. It is **not** substituting one drug for another. Used properly, medication does **not** create a new addiction. It helps manage addiction so people can maintain the benefits of recovery.

Treatment may include medication

Hospitals and treatment centers use medications to allow people with drinking problems to safely stop drinking. In addition to medications used in these settings, there are medications that can be effective in helping recovery when used in combination with counseling and other support.

Long-term recovery is possible by changing the way people think about alcohol through:

- Counseling and support groups to examine why they drink and make changes to stay sober
- Non-addictive medications for long-term treatment to decrease cravings, change the drinking experience and decrease the risk of relapse while working toward recovery

Note: No existing medication can guarantee that problem drinkers will not return to drinking or relapse.

There are three main choices for medication

Currently, three Food and Drug Administration-approved choices are available for treating alcohol addiction and helping patients avoid relapse:

1. Naltrexone
2. Acamprosate
3. Disulfiram

These medications have been shown to help with recovery. Each one varies in how it acts and its possible side effects. People should talk to their health care provider to select a medication. Please see the table for details on each medication.

Naltrexone

Description

- Blocks brain receptors that make drinking enjoyable. So, a person is likely to drink less because it doesn't feel as good.
- Decreases the number of relapses
- Does **not** get rid of withdrawal symptoms

Form and Frequency

- Pill, taken once daily, or
- Long-acting injectable given once every four weeks at a provider's office or treatment center

Common Side Effects

- Nausea

Side Effects – Contact your provider immediately if you experience any of the following

- Severe:
  - Nervousness
  - Fatigue
  - Insomnia
  - Vomiting and/or diarrhea
  - Anxiety
  - Drowsiness
- Any sign of:
  - Confusion
  - Hallucinations
  - Blurred vision

Acamprosate

Description

- Prevents relapse by decreasing alcohol cravings
- May help to return the brain to normal activity after one stops drinking, although it is not clear exactly how the drug works
- Does not change the drinking experience
- Does not prevent withdrawal symptoms
- Is **not** effective for those who continue to drink or use drugs
- Does **not** get rid of withdrawal symptoms

Form and Frequency

- Pill taken three times each day, usually at meal time, although it can be taken without food

Common Side Effects

- Diarrhea

Side Effects – Contact your provider immediately if you experience any of the following

- Severe:
  - Diarrhea
  - Anxiety
  - Muscle weakness
  - Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Any sign of:
  - Depression
  - Suicidal thoughts

Disulfiram

Description

- Causes unpleasant effects when alcohol is consumed (e.g., shaking, sweating, anxiety, nausea, vomiting or flushing of the face)
- Does not specifically decrease alcohol cravings, but it is effective in discouraging drinking
- Should not be taken while a person is intoxicated
- Does **not** get rid of withdrawal symptoms

Form and Frequency

- Pill, taken once daily

Common Side Effects

- Drowsiness
- Metallic taste
- Headache

Side Effects – Contact your provider immediately if you experience any of the following

- Any sign of:
  - Excessive tiredness
  - Weakness
  - Lack of energy
  - Loss of appetite
  - Upset stomach
  - Vomiting
  - Yellowness of the skin or eyes
  - Dark urine

WARNINGS

- Some patients cannot take certain medications.
- All medications list warnings, but talk to your health care provider about the reasons for taking one medication instead of another. For example, you might have to avoid certain medications because of an allergy.
- Pay close attention to warnings, and call your health care provider if you experience any side effects listed in the warning.
- Check all medications with your health care provider because they may not mix well with others.
- Avoid driving or other activities where you need to be alert or see clearly until you know your reaction to the medication.
- Avoid drinking alcohol, taking other medicines that contain alcohol and eating food containing alcohol.
- Tell your health care provider if you are pregnant, planning on getting pregnant or breastfeeding.

Medication is matched to the person

Meeting with a health care provider is the first step in starting a medication program to stop drinking alcohol. It is important to have open, honest communication with health care providers to determine the best treatment program. Providers may ask:

- How long have you been drinking?
- How much do you drink?
- Have you tried to stop or successfully stopped drinking before? If so, did you experience any symptoms of alcohol withdrawal (e.g., sweating, vomiting, increased anxiety)? Did you require medication?
- Do you use any other drugs?
- Do you take any medications that are prescribed or not prescribed to you?
- Do you have any other health problems?
- Have you had an allergic reaction to any medications?
- Are you pregnant?
- What are your goals for recovery?
- Do you have family, friends or peers to support you through treatment and recovery?

The health care provider may also perform a medical exam to look at a person's general health and identify any alcohol-related complications (e.g., liver damage). This exam usually includes:

- Physical exam
- Blood tests to look at blood counts, and liver and kidney functioning
- Electrocardiogram to look at heart functioning
- Blood and urine tests to look for alcohol and other drugs

Talk to your health care provider about:

- Your treatment goals
- The need for medication or a hospital admission for safe withdrawal management
- Medications to help with your long-term recovery
- All medications that you may be taking, even those prescribed by another provider, as they may cause problems or interfere with your recovery
- Future office visits and treatment center schedule
- Avoiding situations which might tempt you to drink alcohol
- Other “tips” to help your success
- A counseling plan
- Support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

When medication is introduced:

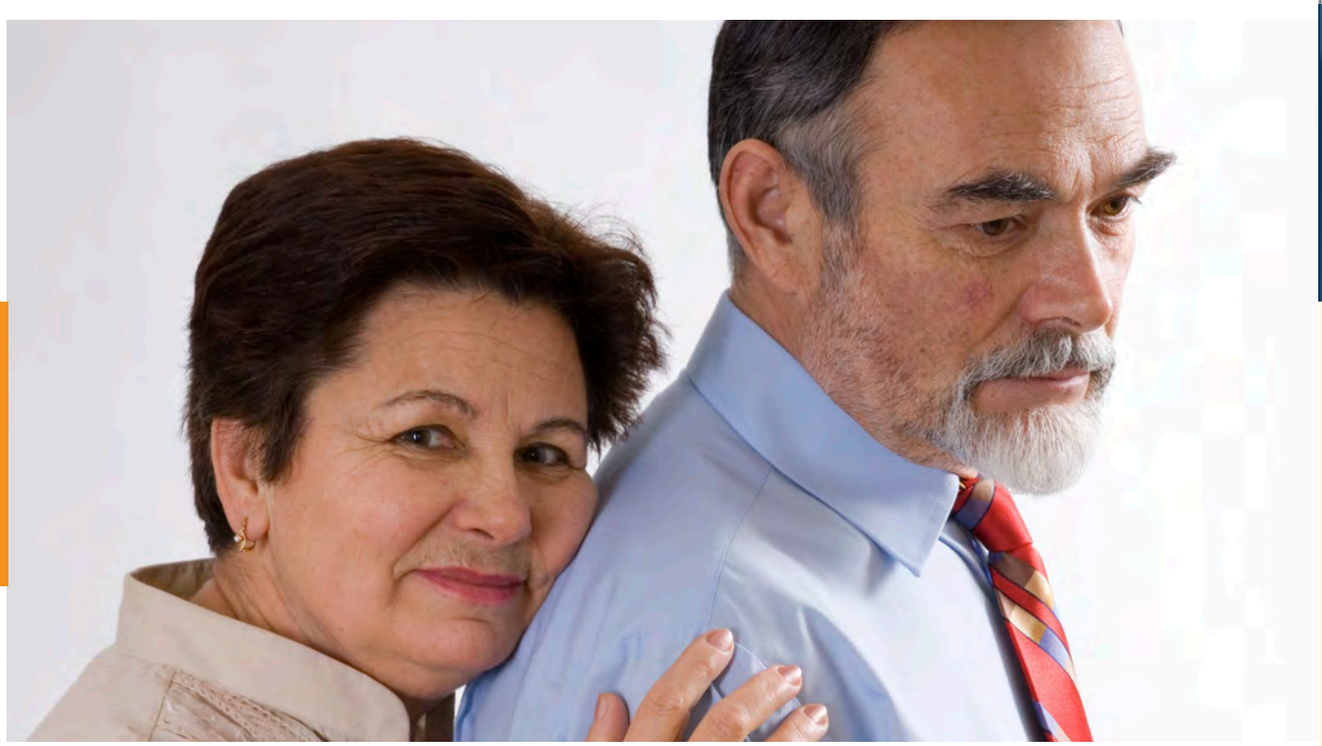
A person should see a health care provider after starting a medication to discuss the trade-offs of benefits and any side effects.

- Acamprosate may be taken safely at the start of recovery.
- Naltrexone may be taken at the start of recovery, unless undergoing opioid detoxification. In this case, medication should follow opioid detoxification because of withdrawal concern.
- Disulfiram may be taken safely only after all alcohol has left the system.

During the development of a treatment plan, providers and patients should discuss medication and a follow-up visit schedule. A person should see a provider after starting a medication to determine whether he or she is tolerating the medication.

Medication can be safely taken for years

There are very few risks with taking medication for alcohol dependence for long periods of time. In rare cases, Naltrexone and Disulfiram have



been connected with liver damage, particularly if taken together. For this reason, these medications are not used together.

Sometimes people decide to stop taking the medications for alcohol dependence on their own. Plans to stop taking medication should be discussed with a provider. Disulfiram and Naltrexone do not cause withdrawal, although those who stop taking Disulfiram may need to wait 14 days before consuming alcohol without a reaction. Some people who stopped taking Acamprosate experienced mild withdrawal symptoms, such as headache and anxiety.

Counseling can help

Some people on medication-assisted treatment may benefit from **counseling**—talking with a professional either one-on-one or in a group with others in treatment. Counseling can provide encouragement and motivation to stick with treatment, while helping people learn about:

- Their addiction, the problems it caused and how to overcome those problems
- Coping skills and relapse prevention
- Healthy decisions, such as how to handle setbacks, and stress how to move forward with their lives

In **group counseling**, people connect with others in treatment, make new friends who don't use alcohol or drugs and begin to build a network to support recovery. They can get these benefits from **support groups** — informal meetings of people facing similar challenges — such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

Family and friends are important too

Recovery can be difficult for many people, and it is hard to tackle alone. Having the support from family and friends can be very important to recovery. They can help the person in recovery avoid or overcome setbacks by providing:

- Love and encouragement to enter into treatment and stick with it
- Practical support, such as rides to treatment, a safe place to live or help finding work

Some treatment programs offer counseling for loved ones because being close to people with addiction can be hard — sometimes causing pain, anger, shame and hopelessness. Counseling is useful for family and friends to learn about:

- Their loved one's addiction
- How to help
- How to handle the problems their loved one's addiction has caused them

Counseling offers a safe place for people to express feelings and to learn about available help.

Notes:

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