

What You Need to Know About Medicine for Alcohol Use Disorder

What is alcohol use disorder?

People with this disorder drink too much alcohol. Drinking too much can hurt your liver and cause bleeding inside your body. You might also have balance problems, confusion, and memory problems. If you drink a lot and then suddenly stop, you can go through withdrawal. Withdrawal can cause shaking, seizures, and sometimes death. Drinking too much alcohol can make it hard for you to do your job and can affect your relationships with other people.

How is it treated?

Alcohol use disorder is a common cause of preventable death in the United States, yet many people don't get treated. If you drink too much, tell your doctor. Possible treatments are counseling (by yourself or in a group), support groups, and medicine. Your doctor can help you choose the treatment that is best for you.

What medicines can be used?

Three medicines are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to treat alcohol use disorder. They are acamprosate (brand: Campral), disulfiram (brand: Antabuse), and naltrexone (brand: Revia or Vivitrol).

Acamprosate and naltrexone usually work the best. These medicines may help you drink less or stop drinking and not start again.

Medicines that are used to treat other illnesses may also help you drink less. These include antidepressants; some antiseizure medicines, like gabapentin (brand: Neurontin) or topiramate (brand: Topamax); and an antinausea medicine called ondansetron (brand: Zofran).

All of these treatments work best if you also go to counseling or a support group. If your doctor recommends medicine, you should take it every day and see your doctor regularly.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

Al-Anon Family Groups
<http://www.al-anon.alateen.org>

Alcoholics Anonymous
<http://www.aa.org>

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism
<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-use-disorders>

Self-Management and Recovery Training
<http://www.smartrecovery.org>

Women for Sobriety
<http://www.womenforsobriety.org>

March 2016

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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