ALCOHOL WITHDRAWAL-SYMPTOMS CAN RANGE FROM MILD TO LIFE-THREATENING

When heavy or frequent drinkers suddenly decide to quit "cold turkey" they will experience some physical withdrawal symptoms — which can range from the mildly annoying to severe and even life-threatening.

The severity of these withdrawal symptoms is usually dependent upon how "chemically dependent" the chronic drinker has become. Those who drink heavily on a daily basis of course have developed a high level of dependency, but even those who drink daily, but not heavily and those who drink heavily but not daily, can also be chemically dependent upon alcohol.

When someone who has become "alcohol dependent" decides to stop drinking, they will experience some level of physical discomfort. For this reason, it is extremely difficult for them to merely stop drinking "on their own" without assistance and support.

‘Never Again’

The scenario has been played over and over many times. After a particularly damaging or embarrassing binge, the hungover person will make an oath to himself and others to drink "never again" and quite often is sincere about quitting. But with the onset of withdrawal symptoms, also comes the "craving" for more alcohol. The body is telling the drinker that it "needs" alcohol. As the physical symptoms of withdrawal begin to increase, taking another drink simply becomes less painful than not taking one — or so it seems at the time.

For those who have committed themselves to not drinking again, or forced by circumstances to not have access to alcohol, the struggle to fight the withdrawal symptoms can become a dangerous battle, one that can actually become life threatening.

The Shakes

For some, who are less chemically dependent, withdrawal symptoms might be as "mild" as merely getting the shakes, or the sweats — or perhaps nausea, headache, anxiety; a rapid heart beat, and increased blood pressure.
Although these symptoms are uncomfortable and irritating, they are not necessarily dangerous. But they are often accompanied by the "craving" for more alcohol, making the decision to continue abstinence much more difficult to make.

Even the "morning after" hangover of someone who only occasionally drinks to excess, is actually a mild form of alcohol withdrawal from the excesses of the night before, as the alcohol content of their blood begins to drop. The symptoms can appear within a few hours after not drinking.

The DT's

However, within six to 48 hours after not drinking, hallucinations may develop. These usually are visual hallucinations but they can also involve sounds and smells. They can last for a few hours up to weeks at a time.

Also within this time frame after quitting, convulsions or seizures can occur, which is the point at which alcohol withdrawal can become dangerous, if not medically treated. The symptoms may progress to delirium tremens (DT's) after three to five days without alcohol. The symptoms of DT's include profound confusion, disorientation, hallucinations, hyperactivity, and extreme cardiovascular disturbances. Once DT's begin, there is no known medical treatment to stop them. Grand mal seizures, heart attacks and stroke can occur during the DT's, all of which can be fatal.

Getting Treatment

The good news for those who are extremely alcohol dependent, and who wish to quit drinking, all of these symptoms can be alleviated and even eliminated with proper medical treatment.

Typically, for those who are mildly dependent; doses of vitamins (Thiamin) and a proper diet will prevent most of the mild withdrawal symptoms from occurring. For the severely dependent, medication can be administered, but only by a physician. One approach is to substitute Valium for alcohol and gradually reduce the dosage until the patient is drug free.

If you are a heavy drinker and want to quit, consult a trained medical professional, and be honest about your usual alcohol intake. The psychological withdrawal is enough to deal with, without also having to
fight the physical symptoms.
You don't have to do it "on your own" to prove anything to anyone. Help is available, take advantage of it.

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