

explore the problem and possible options, discuss optimal treatments, and explain the benefits of abstinence.

ALCOHOL WITHDRAWAL

If the patient agrees to stop drinking, sudden decreases in alcohol intake can produce withdrawal symptoms, most of which are the opposite of those produced by intoxication. Features include tremor of the hands (shakes); agitation and anxiety; autonomic nervous system overactivity including an increase in pulse, respiratory rate, sweating, and body temperature; and insomnia. These symptoms usually begin within 5–10 h of decreasing ethanol intake, peak on day 2 or 3, and improve by day 4 or 5, although mild levels of these problems may persist for 4–6 months as a protracted abstinence syndrome.

About 2% of individuals with alcohol use disorders experience a withdrawal seizure, with the risk increasing in the context of older age, concomitant medical problems, misuse of additional drugs, and higher alcohol quantities. The same risk factors also contribute to the ~1% rate of withdrawal delirium, also known as *delirium tremens* (DTs), where the withdrawal includes delirium (mental confusion, agitation, and fluctuating levels of consciousness) associated with a tremor and autonomic overactivity (e.g., marked increases in pulse, blood pressure, and respirations). The risks for seizures and DTs can be diminished by identifying and treating underlying medical conditions early in the course of withdrawal and by instituting adequate doses of depressant medications such as benzodiazepines.

Thus, the first step in dealing with possible withdrawal phenomena is a thorough physical examination in all heavy drinkers who are considering abstinence. This includes evaluation of possible liver impairment, gastrointestinal bleeding, cardiac arrhythmias, infection, and glucose or electrolyte imbalances. It is also important to offer adequate nutrition and oral multiple B vitamins, including 50–100 mg of oral thiamine daily for a week or more. Because most patients with alcohol use disorders who enter withdrawal are either normally hydrated or mildly overhydrated, IV