

Alcohol Related Brain Damage

Information and advice for patients

Drug and Alcohol Care Team

What is Alcohol Related Brain Damage (ARBD)?

This is a condition which affects your brain. It is caused by a lack of vitamin B1 (thiamine). People who drink large amounts of alcohol are more likely to have low levels of thiamine. This is because:

- The body uses thiamine to break down carbohydrates. Alcohol contains carbohydrates, so the more alcohol you drink the more thiamine you need.
- Alcohol stops your body from absorbing thiamine properly.
- Thiamine is used by your body during the alcohol detox process.

Other reasons you may not have enough thiamine include:

- If you have a poor diet or you have been sick which reduces the absorption of nutrients from your diet.
- If you have liver disease. This can reduce the ability of your liver to store thiamine.
- If you have lost a lot of weight recently.

This can lead to a condition called Wernicke's Encephalopathy, caused by thiamine deficiency.

Early signs of ARBD:

- Loss of appetite
- feeling or being sick
- Feeling tired or weak
- Dizziness
- Double or blurred vision
- Difficulty sleeping
- Anxiety or difficulty concentrating

Later signs of ARBD:

- Memory loss
- Problems with your eyesight
- Unsteady on your feet or you have been falling over
- Confusion

How is Wernicke's encephalopathy treated?

Whilst in hospital you will be treated with intravenous (IV) thiamine to quickly raise your thiamine levels. If Wernicke's encephalopathy is not treated correctly, it can be life threatening. It can lead to permanent brain damage. It is vital that you are given this treatment. After you have finished treatment, you will be started on oral thiamine tablets. You will need to take these for a minimum of 6 weeks.

What can I do to increase my thiamine levels?

- Take thiamine tablets as prescribed.
- Make sure you eat a healthy diet with regular meals.
- Good sources of thiamine include green vegetables, sweetcorn, egg yolks, liver, brown rice, and fortified breakfast cereals.
- Reduce, or ideally stop drinking alcohol.
- If you develop an alcohol dependence again, please seek medical advice before detox and/or stopping drinking abruptly.

Tips to stay alcohol free

- Remove it from your home.
- Identify what triggers you to drink and find ways to avoid them.
- Set goals which will keep you motivated.
- Keep busy with physical activities or new hobbies.
- Try alcohol free alternatives.
- Remember, it's ok to say no to alcohol!

Alternatively, if you want to continue drinking but at a reduced level try these tips:

- Set limits and stick to them.
- Set time limits for when you plan to start and stop drinking.
- Eat a meal before you drink to fill your stomach.
- Alternate between alcoholic and non-alcohol drinks.
- Keep a drink diary.
- Aim to have at least 3 alcohol free days per week.

Useful Organisations

Alcohol Change UK

Tel: 020 3907 8480

www.alcoholchange.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

0800 917 7650

For Sandwell residents:

Cranstoun Community drug and alcohol services

<https://cranstoun.org>

0121 553 1333

For Birmingham residents:

Change Grow Live – Lonsdale House

www.changegrowlive.org

0121 227 5890

For Dudley residents:

Change Grow Live - Atlantic House

www.changegrowlive.org

01384 426 120

Contact Us

Drug and Alcohol Care Team

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