

Medications for Alcohol Use Disorder: A Quick Guide

- Alcohol use disorder is a medical condition that occurs when a person drinks alcohol, even when it is harmful for them.
- People with alcohol use disorder may have difficulty controlling their alcohol use, even when they want to.
- Several medications are available for the treatment of alcohol use disorder that are both effective and safe for many people.
- This brochure may help you decide if medications are right for you. If you have questions, talk to your health care provider.

Can medications help decrease your drinking?

- There are medications that can help people with alcohol use disorder either decrease or stop drinking. The two most common are naltrexone and acamprosate.
- The choice of medication depends on your drinking goals, other medications you're taking and other medical conditions you have.
- Medications work best when used as part of a treatment plan that includes counselling and/or participation in a support group.

Is medication safe?

When prescribed and monitored by your healthcare provider, naltrexone and acamprosate are safe. These medications are not addictive, and you will not have to take them long-term.



What happens if you drink alcohol while taking these medications?

You may have heard of disulfiram, a medication that causes headaches, flushing, and vomiting when you drink alcohol. Naltrexone and acamprosate work differently; they do not change the way alcohol affects your body or cause an unpleasant reaction if you drink alcohol.

NALTREXONE

Naltrexone may help you reduce how much you drink and how often you drink alcohol.

How do I take this medication?

- Naltrexone comes as a 50 mg tablet.
- The usual dose is 1 tablet, once daily.

Does it interact with other medications?

Naltrexone can block the effects of medications that contain an opioid (e.g. codeine, oxycodone, hydromorphone). Naltrexone can also cause withdrawal symptoms from opioids if they are taken together. Be sure to tell your healthcare provider if you are taking medications or over-the-counter products.

What are the possible side effects?

Naltrexone may cause nausea, headaches, and dizziness when you first start. Side effects are usually mild and often improve after a few weeks. Your prescriber may start you at a lower dose for a few days to help reduce the risk of side effects.

Naltrexone may have an undesirable effect on your liver. To reduce this risk, You may require periodic blood work to monitor your liver function.



ACAMPROSATE

Acamprosate may help you avoid drinking alcohol.

How do I take this medication?

- Acamprosate comes as a 333 mg tablet.
- The usual dose is 2 tablets taken 3 times a day.
- Acamprosate works best when you have not had any alcohol for a few days.
- You may need a lower dose if your kidney function is reduced.

Does it interact with other medications?

Acamprosate can be taken with most medications. Be sure to tell your healthcare provider if you are taking medications or over-the-counter products.

What are the possible side effects?

Acamprosate may cause diarrhea, abdominal pain, gas, and nausea. Side effects are usually mild and often improve in the first few weeks. Your prescriber may start you at a lower dose to reduce the risk of side effects.

Did you know?

- Regular heavy drinking can cause your body to become dependent on alcohol. If alcohol is suddenly stopped it can cause symptoms of withdrawal that can be serious.
- Naltrexone and acamprosate are not used to treat early withdrawal. However, other medications are effective and may be used for a short time (e.g. benzodiazepines).
- Talk to your healthcare provider about the best option for you before you stop drinking.