

Medication-assisted treatment is used for people with an alcohol use disorder. It uses medication, in combination with counseling and behavior therapies, to treat alcohol use disorder and sustain recovery. Medication can help to:

- Regain a stable state of mind, free from alcohol-induced highs and lows
- Provide freedom from thinking about alcohol all the time
- Reduce problems of craving
- Focus on lifestyle changes that lead back to healthy living

Taking medication for alcohol use disorder is like taking medication to treat any other medical condition. It is **not** substituting one drug for another. Used properly, medication does not create a new addiction.

Note: No existing medication can guarantee that problem drinkers will not return to drinking, or relapse.

Currently, there are four medications that are recommended by Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense for treating alcohol use disorder:

- **Acamprosate**
- **Disulfiram**
- **Naltrexone**
- **Topiramate**

Each medication acts differently and has different side effects. None of these medications will get rid of symptoms of withdrawal. Please see the tables for information on each medication in this brochure.

Some medication may be safely taken for years

Plans to stop taking medication should be discussed with a health care provider because abruptly stopping medication can cause serious health problems.

Medication is matched to you

Meeting with a health care provider is the first step in starting a medication program to reduce or stop drinking alcohol. You and your health care provider can work together to select a medication that is right for you.

Talk to your health care provider about:

- Your treatment goals
- Safe withdrawal management, to include the need for medication or a hospital admission
- Medications to help with your long-term recovery
- All medications that you are taking, such as over-the-counter medications, herbal supplements, and even those prescribed by another provider, as they may cause problems or interfere with your recovery
- Future office visits and treatment schedule
- How to avoid situations which might tempt you to drink alcohol
- A counseling plan and available support groups

Counseling can be offered as part of medication-assisted treatment or by itself. It consists of talking with a mental health provider either one-on-one or in a group with others in treatment. Counseling can provide encouragement, motivation to stick with treatment, and coping skills to avoid relapse.

In **group counseling** and mutual support groups, people connect with others in treatment and can begin to build a network of people to support recovery.

Support from family and friends can be very helpful during treatment and recovery. Some treatment programs offer counseling for loved ones because being close to someone with an addiction can be hard. Counseling is useful for family and friends to learn about:

- Addiction
- How to help
- How to handle other problems



Medications for the Treatment of Alcohol Use Disorder

Resilience

Reintegration

Recovery



How can you reduce the risks associated with drinking too much alcohol?

Alcohol use disorder can be treated

A person with an alcohol use disorder can recover and regain a healthy life. For some, alcohol use disorder can be a **chronic disease**, like heart disease or diabetes, but it can be managed.

Most people with a serious drinking problem need help to return to normal, healthy living. They can get this help with **treatment** from health care providers, to include physicians.

Treatment helps people to:

- Stop drinking
- Get through withdrawal and cope with cravings
- Address issues tied to the addiction, such as low self-worth, a bad work or home situation, or spending time with people who encourage alcohol or drug use
- Begin making healthier choices—a way of living referred to as **recovery**



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Acamprosate (a-kam'-pro-sate)

Description

- Repairs chemical imbalance in systems of the brain responsible for excitation
- Decreases the number of relapses

Potential side effects

- Diarrhea
- Nervousness
- Weakness
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Depression*
- Suicidal thoughts*

STOP * CONTACT YOUR HEALTH CARE PROVIDER IMMEDIATELY IF YOU EXPERIENCE THIS SIDE EFFECT

Disulfiram (dye-sul'-fi-ram)

Description

- Causes unpleasant effects when alcohol is consumed:
 - Flushing of the face
 - Throbbing headache
 - Difficulty breathing
 - Nausea
 - Vomiting
 - Sweating
- Does not decrease alcohol cravings

Those taking it should avoid alcohol in all forms including mouthwash and over the counter medications

Potential side effects

- Sleepiness
- Metallic taste
- Headache
- Yellowness of the skin or eyes*
- Numbness or tingling in hands and feet*
- Confusion*
- Losing contact with reality*
- Excessive and severe reaction when alcohol is consumed*

STOP * CONTACT YOUR HEALTH CARE PROVIDER IMMEDIATELY IF YOU EXPERIENCE THIS SIDE EFFECT

Naltrexone (nal-trex'-one)

Description

- Decreases or completely blocks the enjoyable effects of drinking
- Decreases the number of relapses

Potential side effects

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Injection site reaction (hardening, itching or swelling)
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Nervousness
- Feeling tired
- Feeling sleepy
- Decreased appetite
- Yellowness of the skin or eyes*
- Allergic pneumonia with difficulty breathing, coughing, or wheezing*
- Suicidal thoughts*

STOP * CONTACT YOUR HEALTH CARE PROVIDER IMMEDIATELY IF YOU EXPERIENCE THIS SIDE EFFECT

Topiramate (toe-pyre'-a-mate)

Description

- Decreases craving for alcohol
- Repairs chemical imbalance in systems of the brain responsible for excitation and reward

Potential side effects

- Abnormal tingling
- Nervousness
- Feeling tired
- Poor coordination
- Sleepiness
- Pain in belly
- Reduced appetite
- Poor memory*
- Confusion*
- Slowing of movements*
- Difficulty with concentration*
- Difficulty finding exact words*
- Suicidal thoughts*

STOP * CONTACT YOUR HEALTH CARE PROVIDER IMMEDIATELY IF YOU EXPERIENCE THIS SIDE EFFECT



⚠️ WARNING



Let your health care provider know of any allergies or existing health conditions.



Tell your health care provider if you are pregnant, planning on getting pregnant or breastfeeding.



Some patients cannot take certain medications because of health conditions or the medications may not mix well with others.



Tell your health care provider if you experience any side effects.



Avoid driving or other activities where you need to be alert or see clearly until you know your reaction to the medication.



Avoid drinking alcohol, taking other medications that contain alcohol and eating food containing alcohol.