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Education

Narcotic Drug Withdrawal

What is narcotic drug withdrawal?

Narcotic drug addiction is physical and mental dependence on certain kinds of drugs. Narcotics change your response to sensations. Narcotics also produce mood changes, unconsciousness, or deep sleep. Examples of narcotics are heroin, codeine, morphine, and methadone.

If you are addicted to a drug, you may have to stop taking it because of short supply, lack of money, or being in jail, a hospital, or another institution, in which the drug is not available. You may also stop taking the drug because you want to break your drug habit.

How does it occur?

You are addicted when you have a history of continued use of narcotics over a long period of time. You will have signs of withdrawal after you stop taking the drug. Withdrawal from narcotics usually causes discomfort but not death.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of withdrawal from a narcotic drug depend on how severe your addiction is. On a scale of 0 to 4, the symptoms are:

0: anxiety and strong desire for the drug

1: watery eyes, watery discharge from the nose, and yawning

2: above symptoms plus dilated (enlarged) pupils of the eyes, loss of appetite, shakes, hot and cold flashes, and aching of your whole body

3: severe shakes, hot and cold flashes, aching, fever, high blood pressure, fast pulse, and rapid breathing

4: diarrhea, vomiting, low blood pressure, and dehydration.

Additional symptoms of withdrawal from severe addiction may include:

- weight loss
- spontaneous ejaculation or orgasm.

How is it treated?

Successful treatment of narcotic drug withdrawal is based on the idea that it is best to give you enough drugs to get rid of withdrawal symptoms without causing mental clouding or a "high."

Treatment with medicines:

Your health care provider will begin treating you by giving buprenorphine, methadone, or clonidine at the first signs of withdrawal.

- Buprenorphine is a man-made drug that blocks withdrawal and craving without producing a strong narcotic

high. It has a milder withdrawal phase than methadone or heroin. Buprenorphine is given by mouth 12 to 24 hours after you have stopped using heroin or morphine.

- Methadone is a long-acting, man-made drug used during withdrawal treatment for morphine and heroin addicts. Methadone is given by mouth every 4 to 6 hours until your symptoms are gone.
- Clonidine helps addiction to both smoking and narcotics. Clonidine is generally taken several times a day for 10 to 14 days.

If you are moderately addicted, you can usually withdraw over a period of 5 to 10 days. Your health care provider will watch you closely during this treatment.

If you are heavily addicted, you will need a withdrawal maintenance program for several months. Your health care provider gradually reduces your dosage during this time.

Psychological Treatment:

Your health care provider or counselor will help you to admit that you have a drug problem. He or she will also help you identify the stresses in your life and find ways to better handle stress and anxiety.

Your health care provider will recommend community self-help groups, usually led by former addicts, as well as individual counseling for you. Parents, family, and friends should attend counseling sessions to form a support group. These sessions will encourage speaking about feelings. You may also get information about nutrition, exercise, relaxation, and deep breathing techniques.

How long will the effects last?

Withdrawal periods vary from person to person but the worst part usually lasts 7 to 10 days.

How can I take care of myself?

Follow these guidelines:

- Take the full course of treatment prescribed by your health care provider.
- Do not use narcotic drugs again.
- Take only medicines prescribed by your health care provider.
- Be aware of the side effects of the medicines you take and interactions with other medicines.
- Stay away from people who use street drugs and from places where you previously obtained or used drugs.
- Seek counseling for yourself or anyone you feel might be addicted to drugs.
- Stay with a support group that can help you through hard times.
- Start an exercise program.
- Avoid alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine.
- Take it one day at a time. Remember that you are always recovering and are never truly free from your addiction.

What can be done to help prevent narcotic drug use?

Stay away from drugs except when your health care provider prescribes them for a medical problem and checks your use of them.

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