

MANAGING YOUR DELIRIUM TREMENS

What Is Delirium Tremens?

Delirium is sudden confusion with disorientation, hallucinations, changing emotions, and unruly or violent behavior. Delirium tremens, or DTs, is a severe kind of alcohol withdrawal. Up to 500,000 cases occur each year in the United States.

What Causes Delirium Tremens?

Problem drinking is drinking more than 7 drinks per week or more than 3 drinks per occasion for women, and more than 14 drinks per week or more than 4 drinks per occasion for men. Heavy drinking is drinking more than 3 or 4 drinks per day for women and more than 5 or 6 drinks per day for men. One standard drink is one 12-oz bottle of beer; one 5-oz glass of wine; or 1.5-oz glass of 80 proof spirits. People who regularly drink too much alcohol and then stop can get DTs. DTs usually occur within 1 week after drastically reducing or stopping heavy drinking, and last 1 to 3 days.

What Are the Symptoms of Delirium Tremens?

Symptoms include tremors, unsteadiness, nausea, stomach pains, diarrhea, and vomiting. Sweating, palpitations, tiredness, weakness, blackouts, seizures, mood swings, depression, anxiety, and forgetfulness are others.

How Is Delirium Tremens Diagnosed?

The health care provider makes a diagnosis from a history of alcohol withdrawal in people who abuse alcohol. A scale used to measure how severe the withdrawal is and to guide treatment is

used. It includes the symptoms above plus agitation, headache, feeling disoriented, and touch, hearing, and vision problems.

How Is Delirium Tremens Treated?

DTs can be life-threatening and are a medical emergency. Most people need treatment in a detox unit. Detoxification usually takes a few days to a week. People may need extra fluids during this time, usually given intravenously. Vitamins, electrolytes, and sedating medicines are given with the intravenous fluids to control agitation and prevent seizures. Other medical, surgical, or psychiatric conditions also need treatment. Long-term goals include getting social support for recovery. The 12-step programs, AA, and getting family members involved in support groups for families of alcohol abusers may help. People need to learn new coping skills to use instead of drinking. Old routines and habits, such as drinking with friends, should change.

DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Delirium Tremens

- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you have effects of alcohol abuse. These are nausea; lasting vomiting; constant diarrhea; heartburn or tightness in your chest; blood in the stools, especially dark red blood; and vomiting blood. Tell your health care provider about these possibly life-threatening conditions.
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you have thoughts of suicide or suicidal behavior.
- ✓ **DO** find a support group for alcoholics if you think that would help.
- ⊗ **DON'T** stop taking prescribed medicines or change the dosage because you feel better unless your health care provider tells you to.

⊗ **DON'T** lie to your health care provider about alcohol abuse. If the health care provider doesn't mention it, you should.

⊗ **DON'T** forget that DTs can be lethal if not carefully treated. The death rate is 15% in untreated people.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the following sources:

- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA): Website:
<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/index.htm>
- Alcoholics Anonymous (International Office): Tel: (212) 870-3400; Website:
<http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org>

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