
Alcohol Withdrawal Time Course and Symptoms

Time Course

- Alcohol withdrawal symptom onset: Usually within six to eight hours of last drink, though in some very heavy drinkers, withdrawal may not begin until 24 hours after last drink.
- Peak withdrawal: Within 24–48 hours.
- Duration of withdrawal:
 - Mild withdrawal will usually last not more than 72 hours (three days) after symptoms begin.
 - More severe withdrawal can last significantly longer and involve the symptoms below.

Symptoms

- Initial symptoms: Insomnia, anxiety, tremor, sweating, palpitations, headache, gastrointestinal upset.
- Progressive symptoms: Nausea, irritability, elevated blood pressure, tachycardia, elevated body temperature, diaphoresis, increased tremulousness, hyperarousal, and disorientation.
- Withdrawal seizures typically occur within six to 48 hours after last drink and present as generalized, tonic-clonic seizures with a short postictal period.
 - A history of withdrawal seizures increases risk of subsequent seizures (kindling effect).
 - Untreated seizures can progress to delirium tremens (DT) in one-third of patients.
- Alcoholic hallucinosis involves hallucinations that develop within 12–48 hours after last drink and occur with clear sensorium and minimal vital sign changes.
 - Are usually visual, though can occur in any sensory modality.
 - Can persist for up to one week after last drink.
- DT is the most severe form of alcohol withdrawal. It presents with disorientation, hallucinations or illusions, tremors, tachycardia, hypertension, hyperthermia, anxiety, agitation, and diaphoresis.
 - Usually begins 48–96 hours after last drink and can last up to two weeks.
 - DT is a life-threatening condition with mortality ranges of 5%–8%. Death most commonly occurs due to arrhythmias or complications from comorbid medical conditions.