

# **Alcohol or Drug Abuse Recovery: Your Doctor Can Help**

## **Why do I need to tell my doctor that I am in recovery?**

The decision to stop using alcohol or other drugs is very important to your health. If your doctor knows that you have made this decision, he or she can help you during your recovery. By working with your doctor, you can increase your chance of not abusing alcohol or other drugs again. Your doctor can give you emotional support and treat any medical problems that may occur during your recovery. It is also important for your doctor to know that you have a history of using alcohol or other drugs.

## **What are the medical consequences of alcohol or drug abuse?**

Alcohol and other drugs can cause or worsen a wide range of medical problems. For example, alcohol increases the risk of some stomach and heart diseases. Some people get gastritis (inflammation of the stomach lining) or high blood pressure because of drinking too much alcohol. Also, if you were taking a medicine, such as blood pressure medicine, during the time when you were drinking or using drugs, your doctor may need to lower the dose of this medicine now that you're not drinking or using drugs.

Mood changes, such as irritability, anger, depression and anxiety, insomnia (problems sleeping) and problems with sexual function are common in the first few months of recovery. If you have any of these problems and discuss them honestly with your doctor, he or she can help you.

## **Is it safe to take medicine for pain or anxiety if I have these problems?**

In general, taking medicines for anxiety or pain for a long time can increase your risk of a relapse. For this reason, your doctor may want you to try other ways of relieving any pain, anxiety, depression or insomnia you may have. For example, instead of using medicine to relieve pain, your doctor may suggest that you try physical therapy, relaxation techniques, ice or heat on the painful area, or massage. These methods are often helpful. Non-narcotic pain medicines can also be helpful in relieving pain if the other methods don't work. Using relaxation techniques, like deep breathing and meditation, may also help relieve your feelings of stress and anxiety.

Tranquilizers and some muscle relaxants, such as benzodiazepines, barbiturates and meprobamate (brand names: Equanil, Miltown), should be avoided if at all possible. Narcotic medicines, including pain killers, analgesics and opiates, increase the risk of relapse. This is particularly true if you have previously abused a narcotic such as heroin, codeine, morphine or oxycodone (two brand names: Oxycontin, Percodan). None of these medicines should be used for chronic (ongoing) pain problems, such as chronic back pain or migraine pain. However, narcotics, tranquilizers or muscle relaxants may be prescribed for a few days to manage pain due to an injury, surgery or a dental procedure.

## **What if I need a strong pain medicine?**

When tranquilizers and narcotics are the only option (such as after an injury or surgery), you can reduce your risk of relapse by being open and honest with your doctor. The two of you can work together to find the safest treatment for you.

The smallest possible dose of a tranquilizer or narcotic medicine should be used, and the medicine should be taken for as short a time as possible. If you are active in a 12-step program or another self-help support program, you should let your fellow members know that you are taking these medications.

### **Is it safe to take antidepressants if depression is a problem during my recovery?**

Depression can be a problem for some patients during recovery. Major depression is a serious medical condition and often must be treated with an antidepressant. Many patients in recovery are concerned about taking one of these medicines. However, when appropriately prescribed, antidepressants do not carry a risk of relapse. Based on your recovery status, your doctor will be able to tell if you need to take an antidepressant.

During the first few months of recovery, you may find that participation in a self-help group like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous can help with certain feelings of depression. It is very important to let your doctor know if you are involved in such a group.

### **Why is it important for me to be honest with my doctor about my history of alcohol or drug abuse?**

Honesty and strict attention to the process of recovery are among the keys to long-term success. For this reason, it is very important for you to be honest with your doctor.

In the past, you may not have been open with your doctor about how much, how often and how long you used alcohol or other drugs. You may be uncomfortable about telling your doctor that you have abused prescription medicines. Perhaps you're afraid that sharing this information with your doctor may result in him or her not prescribing medicines when you need them.

No matter what your past relationship with your doctor was--whether or not you were open about your alcohol or drug problem--your future relationship needs to be based on trust. You must be willing to work together to support your long-term recovery. Just as you can learn something from your doctor, your doctor can learn something from you. For example, you may be involved in a 12-step program, and your doctor may not know as much about how the program works as you do. He or she will be eager to learn from you and to help you with your journey to recovery.

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