

Naltrexone

Patient-client information

Naltrexone is a medication that decreases cravings for alcohol in people who have been dependent on alcohol and are trying to stop using it. It helps reduce the chance of you returning to drinking if you have been dependent on alcohol. It does not cause you to be sick if you do drink.

What is alcohol dependence?

Heavy long-term use of alcohol can cause changes in your brain. These changes make it harder for you to stop drinking and can result in dependence or addiction to alcohol. Naltrexone tablets work by blocking chemicals in the brain that make it rewarding to drink alcohol. This helps to reduce the cravings and the need for alcohol, and decreases your chance of drinking.

When should I start taking Naltrexone?

Naltrexone is usually started once your withdrawal symptoms have settled down. This may take between two and seven days. Naltrexone is not a treatment for the shakes or other withdrawal discomfort you may be experiencing when you stop drinking. If you experience symptoms such as the shakes, sleep problems and anxiety when you stop drinking, then you will need some specific treatment for these symptoms before you start Naltrexone. Speak with your doctor about it.

How long do the tablets take to work?

Naltrexone takes effect quickly, but seeking support and planning ahead to manage possible triggers is still very important. Naltrexone tablets are taken once a day, but must be taken regularly. Naltrexone is subsidised by the government Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), and is available on prescription from a doctor (cost is approximately \$6.60/month for health care card holders and \$41/month without concession).

Are there side effects?

Side effects that may occur tend to be mild and short-lived. Naltrexone does not usually have serious side effects, but gastrointestinal symptoms like mild nausea, stomach pain and loss of appetite are common. Some patients also get headaches or tiredness from Naltrexone and very rarely it can cause inflammation of the liver. It is important that your GP follows up liver function blood tests regularly while you are taking Naltrexone.

You should read the information sheet provided with the medication for more information.

Pain relievers and Naltrexone

Naltrexone stops all opiate pain relievers (including codeine, morphine and oxycodone) from working, so you will need to tell your doctor if you are taking this medication.

If you need pain relief, there are other options, but you must tell your doctor you are taking Naltrexone. If you are already taking an opiate pain medication, it may make you feel very unwell if you take it at the same time, so tell your doctor.

Naltrexone should not be used until one week after the last dose of short-acting pain reliever and two weeks after the last dose of long-acting pain reliever.

How will I feel taking these tablets?

Unless you experience any of the side effects listed above, you may not notice anything. Naltrexone will not make you feel high and is not addictive.

Can I take other medications if needed?

Other than pain medications, Naltrexone is not known to cause problems with other medications. If necessary, Naltrexone can be used with other medications such as antidepressants. It should not be taken by pregnant or breastfeeding women, or people who have severe liver disease.

Will it be safe to drive?

Naltrexone is not a sedative and normally should not interfere with your ability to drive or operate machinery, however it does make some people feel drowsy so it would be wise to wait and see how it affects you before driving.

What happens if I consume alcohol?

Treatment with Naltrexone is intended to help you stay off alcohol. However, Naltrexone does not interact with alcohol and there will be no unpleasant reactions if you drink alcohol, although some people have reported that it changes the taste of alcohol. Even if you have a short relapse, you should continue treatment with Naltrexone at the normal dose.

What is a normal dose?

Naltrexone is taken at the same time each day. The normal dose is 50mg daily. There is no need to take more than this.

For how long will I need to take Naltrexone?

The recovery of the brain cells from the effects of alcohol can take many months and it may take six months to a year for you to develop a new lifestyle that does not include alcohol. Successful treatment of alcohol dependence includes some form of counselling while taking Naltrexone. Counselling may be through your GP via a Mental Health Care Plan, a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a drug and alcohol specialist, or through Drug and Alcohol Services South Australia. Alcoholics Anonymous offers additional support in group settings.

For more information

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)

Phone: 1300 13 1340

Confidential telephone counselling and information available between 8.30am and 10pm every day.

www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/dassa

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