

# Disulfiram

## What is disulfiram, and how does it work?

Disulfiram is an alcohol deterrent that is used to help people abstain from alcohol. It used to be available under the name Antabuse. Since it is no longer manufactured by a pharmaceutical company in Canada, it is only available from pharmacies that compound it (such as Pharmacy.ca).



The body ordinarily has a good process for breaking down alcohol. Disulfiram interferes with this process. As a

result, a chemical (acetaldehyde) builds up that can make you feel sick when you drink alcohol. Knowing that even small amounts of alcohol can make you feel sick may strengthen your determination to avoid drinking. Disulfiram works best for patients who are very motivated to abstain from alcohol.

## How is disulfiram taken?

Disulfiram is more effective when taken in a supervised manner. It is normally taken once daily.

## Is it possible to become addicted to disulfiram?

No. Disulfiram is not habit forming or a drug of abuse. It does not cause patients to become physically or psychologically dependent.

## What are the side-effects of disulfiram?

You may get slightly drowsy after taking this medication. This effect usually disappears after a few days. However, your physician may recommend that at first you take your medication at bedtime rather than in the morning.

Because disulfiram is partially excreted in saliva, you may notice a metallic taste in your mouth and a garlic-like smell in your nose. This is not noticeable to others. These effects usually disappear within two weeks after you start taking disulfiram.

If these symptoms persist or if you develop a rash, you should contact your physician. Extremely rarely there can be toxic effects on the liver. You should call your physician immediately if you experience vomiting, yellowness of the skin/eyes, dark urine, loss of appetite, fever, upset stomach or light-coloured stools. Your liver function will be monitored while you are on this medication.

## What will happen if I drink alcohol while taking disulfiram?

If you drink even a small amount of alcohol while you are on disulfiram, your face and neck may become quite warm and red, and you may experience dizziness, a throbbing head, nausea and a pounding heart. If the reaction is severe you may even collapse and pass out. The severity of the reaction varies from person to person, but the more you drink the worse the reaction will be.



## Is the alcohol present in medicines and foods likely to cause a reaction?

Yes, it may. The severity of the reaction will depend on how much alcohol you actually consume. Therefore, you must avoid alcohol in all its forms.

Many vitamin tonics, cough and cold remedies and mouthwashes contain alcohol, sometimes in quite large quantities. Check with your physician or pharmacist before you use liquid medicines.

Some candies and foods also contain alcohol. Food that has been prepared with alcohol and then cooked has usually had most of the alcohol boiled off during the

cooking process. However, avoid food to which alcohol has been added after cooking. To maximize safety, it is best to avoid all foods which have had alcohol added.

It is generally OK to use cosmetic preparations that contain alcohol, such as aftershave lotions, on your face. The amount of alcohol you absorb through your skin is minimal, and the alcohol is chemically different from the type present in beverages. Test any potentially alcohol-containing product before using it by applying some to a small area of the skin for an hour or two. If there is no redness, itching or unwanted effects, the product may be used.

## Can I take other medications with disulfiram?

The clinic will give you a wallet card to carry, which explains that you are on disulfiram and gives the name and number of the physician who prescribed it for you.

The card warns physicians not to give you any medications that contain alcohol, and advises them how to take care of you if you have had a reaction



Tell your physician or pharmacist about the medications you are taking so that possible interactions can be evaluated.

## What will happen if I become pregnant while taking disulfiram?

If there is a possibility of becoming pregnant, use an effective method of birth control while taking disulfiram. If you miss a menstrual period, report this to your physician at once and take a pregnancy test

If you become pregnant, you will need to alert your physician to discuss ongoing treatment options. Your physician will help you abstain from alcohol during pregnancy. Your health should be monitored throughout your pregnancy, as should the health of your baby after delivery.

## Should I take disulfiram with a meal?

Disulfiram can be taken with or without food.

## What happens if I stop taking disulfiram suddenly?

Disulfiram does not cause physical withdrawal symptoms when it is stopped. But remember, you cannot return to drinking for a few weeks after stopping this medication, as you are still at risk of a reaction.

## What happens if I miss a dose?

If you miss a dose of disulfiram, take it as soon as you remember but not if it's close to the time of the next scheduled dose.

## If I take disulfiram, does it mean that I don't need other treatment for alcohol dependence?

No. Research has shown that disulfiram is most effective when it is combined with counselling and/or mutual support groups

Disulfiram works best when taken in a supervised manner. Your physician will tell you the best way to arrange this. Alternatively, we can arrange supervision for you if required.

## What is the relationship of disulfiram to AA and other mutual support groups?

There is no problem with participating in support groups while taking disulfiram. The medication is most likely to be effective for you if your goal is to stop drinking altogether. If other group members caution against taking any medications, refer them to the pamphlet "The AA Member— Medications and Other Drugs," which states that AA members should not "play doctor" and advise others on medication provided by medical practitioners or treatment programs.

