

# Disulfiram

## Patient Information - Hillmorton Hospital Pharmacy

### Why have I been prescribed disulfiram (Antabuse™)?

Disulfiram is designed to help you stop drinking and maintain abstinence from alcohol long-term.

People with alcohol dependence may find it difficult to cut down and stop their alcohol use. Disulfiram is an effective way to help with this.



### What exactly is disulfiram?

When you drink alcohol, it is changed in the body into a chemical called acetaldehyde. Disulfiram blocks the enzyme which breaks down acetaldehyde. This will lead to an unpleasant physical reaction.

When taking disulfiram, this reaction can occur 10 to 20 minutes after drinking alcohol and may last up to two hours or even longer. The reaction consists of: flushing, headache, sweating, shortness of breath, nausea, vomiting, an increased heart rate and feeling dizzy.

The unpleasantness of this reaction acts as a deterrent to drinking alcohol.

### Is disulfiram safe to take?

It is usually safe to take disulfiram regularly as prescribed by your doctor, but it doesn't suit everyone. Let your doctor know if you have the following, as extra care may be needed:

- If you have an allergy to disulfiram or any of the other ingredients.
- If you have severe heart disease or heart failure.
- If you have high blood pressure.
- If you suffer from a severe psychiatric illness.
- If you have suffered from stroke in the past.
- If you have liver or kidney disease.
- If you have seizures, fits or convulsions.
- If you are pregnant or breastfeeding or wish to become pregnant.

### How should I take my disulfiram and what should I do if I miss a dose?

Look at your medicine packet. It should have all the necessary instructions on it. Follow this advice carefully. If you have any questions, speak to your doctor or pharmacist. Disulfiram is usually taken in the morning. However, if you find that the tablets make you sleepy, you can take them before bedtime. It should be taken either dissolved in water or with a glass of water.

Never change your dose without checking with your doctor. If you forget a dose, take it as soon as you remember, as long as it is within 12 hours of the usual time.

Otherwise skip the missed dose and take the next dose when you're meant to. Do not take double the dose to make up for missed doses.

Make sure your family and friends know that it is important for you to not drink **any** alcohol. Even low alcohol, 'non-alcohol' or 'alcohol-free' beers and wines may cause an unpleasant reaction with disulfiram.

## **What will happen to me when I take my disulfiram and I decide to drink alcohol?**

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Disulfiram normally starts to work immediately and most people will not feel any different. If you decide drink alcohol whilst on disulfiram, the disulfiram-alcohol reaction **will** occur.

It starts with flushing from the head downwards involving the face, arms and chest. This is accompanied by a feeling of heat, sweating palpitations, fast heartbeat, and shortness of breath, hyperventilation and headache. There is also a feeling of tightening and irritation in the throat resulting in spasms and coughing. Flushing is then replaced by looking pale, feeling weak, dizzy and sick, and can lead to violent vomiting and stomach cramps.

This reaction usually lasts two hours but can last longer. If you suffer from such a reaction then you should contact a doctor immediately.

Unfortunately, you may get some side effects before you start to feel better. Most side effects should go away after a couple of weeks. Look at the table over the page. It should tell you what to do if you get any of the usual side effects. Most people will not experience any side effects at all. There are also many other possible side effects. Ask your pharmacist, doctor or nurse if you are worried about anything else that you think might be a side effect.

## **Are there any medicines that I should avoid or take care with?**

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Always tell your doctor what you are taking and ask your pharmacist before you buy any "over-the-counter" medicines. Disulfiram can interact with a range of medicines including many liquid medicines and cough and cold remedies. Also, some deodorants, tonics, toiletries, perfumes and sprays may contain enough alcohol to cause a disulfiram-alcohol reaction.

## **When I feel better, can I stop taking disulfiram?**

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No, to reduce the chances of becoming alcohol dependent again, you may need to take your disulfiram even after you have stopped drinking alcohol for some time. You and your doctor should decide when you can come off it.

**Remember, leaflets like this can only describe some effects of medication. You may also find other books or leaflets useful. If you have access to the internet, you may find a lot of information there as well. Be careful as internet-based information is not always accurate.**

**Hillmorton Hospital Pharmacy,**

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| SIDE EFFECT                         | WHAT IS IT?   | WHAT SHOULD I DO IF THIS HAPPENS TO ME?   |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Common</b>                       |   |   |
| Drowsiness                          | Feeling sleepy or sluggish.   | Don't drive or use machinery. Talk to your doctor about taking your disulfiram at a different time of the day.  |
| Lethargy                            | Feeling tired all the time and don't feel like doing anything   | This is common especially when you start disulfiram however it should wear off after a while. Contact your doctor if it is troublesome or does not improve.                                 |
| Nausea, vomiting and abdominal pain | Feeling sick, throwing up and having a sore stomach.  | Taking each dose with or after food may help. Dissolving the tablet before you swallow it may also help. If it is bad, contact your doctor.   |
| Bad breath                          | Metallic after-taste or garlic-like breath.   | Brush your teeth twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste. Try cleaning between your teeth at least a few times a week. Try sugar free chewing gum to freshen your mouth and stimulate saliva |
| <b>Fairly Common</b>                |   |   |
| Allergic skin reaction              | Any sort of rash, redness or itching on the skin.   | Normally only lasts for the first couple of weeks. If it is bad, contact your doctor. Check whether your skin products and deodorants contain alcohol.                                      |
| <b>Uncommon</b>                     |   |   |
| Sexual dysfunction                  | Lack of libido or no interest in sex.   | Discuss this with your doctor when you next meet.   |
| <b>Rare</b>                         |   |   |
| Psychiatric disorders               | You feel depressed or experience mood changes. You may also be having abnormal thoughts.  | Speak to your doctor immediately if you notice any of these.  |
| Peripheral neuritis                 | You may notice numbness, tingling, pain or weakness in hands and feet.  | Speak to your doctor immediately if you notice any of these.  |
| Altered liver function              | Your liver is not working as normal. You may not feel any symptoms. This may only be discovered if your doctor does a blood test. | If you notice any dark urine, yellowing of the skin or eyes (jaundice), severe abdominal pain, vomiting and a fever, speak to your doctor immediately                                       |