

Disulfiram (formerly marketed as Antabuse)

Will disulfiram help me stop drinking?

Disulfiram is most likely to help you stop drinking if:

- you have decided to stop drinking completely
- you have a partner or close friend who will watch you take it every day.

How does disulfiram work?

Under normal conditions, the liver quickly converts alcohol to water and carbon dioxide. When you take disulfiram, it blocks this process, causing the build-up of a toxic chemical called acetaldehyde. This causes nausea, vomiting, severe headache and flushed face. The reaction starts in five minutes, and can last several hours.

Is the reaction dangerous?

The reaction can cause a drop in blood pressure and an irregular heartbeat. This can be dangerous, especially if you have heart disease or take heart or blood pressure medications.

How well does it work?

Very few people try drinking while taking disulfiram. The people who do try drinking almost always feel unwell.

When can I start to take disulfiram?

You should wait at least 12 to 24 hours after your last drink before taking your first disulfiram tablet. Depending on how much you drink, alcohol can stay in your bloodstream for 12 hours or longer.

If I start taking disulfiram and then stop, when can I safely start to drink again?

You need to wait at least seven days to be sure that you won't have a reaction if you drink.

Do I need to avoid foods, medicines and anything else that contains alcohol?

- Avoid mouthwash containing alcohol. The alcohol concentration is high and people often swallow a small amount.
- Avoid liquid cold remedies containing alcohol.
- Avoid alcohol-containing chocolates and cakes.
- Perfume and cologne are safe.
- Food cooked in wine is usually safe because the alcohol evaporates with cooking.

If you do accidentally swallow some alcohol-containing medicine or food, the reaction will be unpleasant but mild.

What are the side-effects of disulfiram?

Other than the alcohol reaction, side-effects of disulfiram include feeling tired, a garlic taste in the mouth and acne. The tiredness tends to lessen and go away over several weeks.

What is the dose and when should I take it?

The usual dose is 125 mg taken once per day. If disulfiram makes you sleepy, it is best to take it at bedtime. Having someone watch you take it can help you to make sure you take it every day.

Are there any reasons why I shouldn't take disulfiram, or should only take it with special precautions?

- Disulfiram has been associated with birth defects. Don't take it if you are pregnant or trying to get pregnant.
- People with heart disease or who are on heart medications can have a dangerous reaction if they drink while taking disulfiram.
- People with cirrhosis of the liver should have their liver enzymes monitored regularly by their physician while taking disulfiram. Rarely, disulfiram can cause a toxic hepatitis.
- Older studies suggest that disulfiram may worsen symptoms of schizophrenia. Newer studies have not found this association.

How long should I take disulfiram?

It is usually recommended that you take disulfiram for about six months, or until you and your family are confident that you will no longer drink. Talk to your doctor before stopping disulfiram.