

Medications for Alcohol Cravings

Naltrexone

Naltrexone blocks opioid receptors that are involved in the rewarding effects of drinking and the craving for alcohol. It has been shown to reduce relapse to problem drinking in some patients. It is marketed as Revia® and Depade® as daily pills. An extended release version, Vivitrol®—administered once a month by injection—is also FDA-approved for treating alcoholism, and may offer benefits regarding compliance.

Acamprosate

Acamprosate (Campral®) is thought to work by increasing inhibitory (GABA) neurotransmission and reducing stimulatory (glutamate) neurotransmission, although its precise mechanism of action is not known. It is used to reduce cravings and symptoms of protracted withdrawal, such as insomnia, anxiety, restlessness, and dysphoria. Acamprosate has been shown to help dependent drinkers maintain abstinence for several weeks to months, and it may be more effective in patients with severe dependence.

Disulfiram

Disulfiram (Antabuse®) interferes with degradation of alcohol, resulting in the accumulation of acetaldehyde, which, in turn, produces a very unpleasant reaction that includes flushing, nausea, and palpitations if a person drinks alcohol. In patients who are highly motivated, disulfiram can be very effective, and some patients use it episodically for high-risk situations, such as social occasions where alcohol is present. It can also be administered in a monitored fashion, such as in a clinic or by a spouse, improving its efficacy.

Topiramate

Topiramate (Topamax®) is thought to work by increasing inhibitory (GABA) neurotransmission and reducing stimulatory (glutamate) neurotransmission, although its precise mechanism of action is not known. Although topiramate has not yet received FDA approval for treating alcohol addiction, it is sometimes used off-label for this purpose. Topiramate has been shown in studies to significantly improve multiple drinking outcomes, compared with a placebo.

Combined With Behavioral Treatment

As with all medication used in medication-assisted treatment (MAT), these medications are to be prescribed as part of a comprehensive treatment plan that includes counseling and participation in a recovery program.

Further Reading:

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National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Helping Patients Who Drink Too Much: A Clinician's Guide, Updated 2005 Edition. Bethesda, MD: NIAAA, updated 2005. Available at pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/Practitioner/CliniciansGuide2005/clinicians_guide.htm