

Wernicke's Encephalopathy

Patient Information Leaflet

What is Wernicke's Encephalopathy?

This is a condition which affects your brain. It is caused by a lack of vitamin B1 (thiamine). People who misuse alcohol are more likely to have low levels of thiamine. This is because:

- The body uses thiamine to break down carbohydrates. Alcohol contains carbohydrates so the more alcohol you drink the more thiamine you need.
- Alcohol stops your body from absorbing thiamine properly.
- Thiamine is used up by your body during the alcohol detox process.

Other reasons you may not have enough thiamine include:

- If you have a poor or inadequate diet and are malnourished, or have been vomiting which stops you absorbing nutrients from your diet.
- If you have liver disease this can stop you from being able to store or 'hold on to' thiamine.
- If you have lost a lot of weight recently.

What are the signs and symptoms of Wernicke's Encephalopathy?

Early signs include:

- Loss of appetite
- Nausea/vomiting
- Tiredness/weakness
- Dizziness
- Double/blurred vision
- Insomnia
- Anxiety, difficulty concentrating
- Memory loss

Later signs include:

- Problems with vision
- Unsteadiness on your feet/falls
- Confusion

How is Wernicke's Encephalopathy treated?

Whilst in hospital you have been given IV (intravenous) thiamine (called Pabrinex). This was given to raise your thiamine levels quickly. You will have had this for around 5 days. It is very important that you had this because if Wernicke's encephalopathy is not treated properly it can be life threatening and lead to permanent brain damage (Korsakoff's syndrome). Korsakoff's can sometimes occur however without an episode of Wernicke's occurring first.

After you have finished the Pabrinex treatment in hospital you will be given thiamine in tablet form to carry on taking when you leave hospital for 28 days.

Will it happen again?

Wernicke's Encephalopathy can recur if you do not make sure you are getting enough thiamine and if you continue to drink.

Things you can do to help

- Take the thiamine tablets prescribed to you regularly when you leave hospital.
- Make sure you eat a healthy diet with regular meals. Good sources of thiamine include:
 - Green vegetables
 - Sweetcorn
 - Egg yolks
 - Liver
 - Brown rice
 - Fortified breakfast cereals
- Think about your alcohol use and try to minimise or **ideally stop drinking** alcohol.
- The Alcohol Liaison Team will be happy to talk to you about how to access support once you leave hospital.
- If you develop alcohol dependence again please seek medical advice before detox and/or stopping drinking abruptly.

For any queries/problems about your medication/treatment, please contact:
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Many people find that they need other support such as provided by CGL/Addaction or AA (Alcoholics Anonymous).

Support groups and contact details

AA UK 24 hour Helpline	0845 7697555
AA Local Meetings	01452 418515
Drink Line	0800 9178282
Al-Anon Family Groups	020 74030888
Families Anonymous	0845 1200660
CGL Gloucestershire	01452 223014
Addaction Herefordshire	01432 802487