

Disulfiram

Antabuse (brand discontinued in the US; generics available), a medicine that makes drinking alcohol cause a hard physical reaction

Disulfiram makes drinking cause a strong, unpleasant reaction, which puts a firm wall between you and the first drink.

WHAT IT TREATS

Alcohol use disorder

HOW YOU TAKE IT

Once daily, usually morning

WHEN IT WORKS

From the first day

HABIT FORMING

No

⚠️ IMPORTANT SAFETY WARNING

Never take **disulfiram** if you have been drinking, and no one should ever be given it without knowing. Everyone taking it must understand that any alcohol at all will bring on a hard, unpleasant reaction.

① WHAT THIS MEDICINE DOES

- **Disulfiram** blocks the step your body uses to break down alcohol, so a toxic byproduct builds up and you feel awful.
- It does not lower cravings. What it does is make the decision to drink a decision you have to make hours in advance.
- That daily pause is the point. Many people find the choice easier to make once each morning than a hundred times a day.
- It works best when someone you trust watches you take it, and when it is paired with counseling or a support group.

🕒 HOW TO TAKE IT

- Take it once a day, usually in the morning. If it makes you sleepy, ask about switching to bedtime instead.
- Your last drink must be at least **12 hours** before your first dose. Starting sooner sets off the reaction.
- Tablets can be crushed and mixed into water or juice if swallowing is hard, but not into anything containing alcohol.
- If you miss a day, take it as soon as you remember. Never take extra to catch up, because that raises the danger.
- Have someone at home hand it to you each morning if you both agree. That is a proven way to make it stick.

📈 WHAT TO EXPECT

- The protection is there from the first day and stays for as long as you keep taking it, whether or not you feel anything.
- On its own, taking the tablet should feel like nothing. Some people notice a metallic taste or mild sleepiness early on.
- Working looks like this: drinking stops being an option you can act on tonight, so the urge passes rather than wins.
- If you do drink, the reaction starts within **10 minutes** and can last several hours. It is frightening and can be dangerous.
- People stay on it for months or longer. Staying on a treatment that is holding the line is a success, not a crutch.

♥️ COMMON SIDE EFFECTS

- Sleepiness or tiredness is the most common effect. Moving the dose to bedtime, with your prescriber, usually solves it.
- A metallic or garlic-like taste in your mouth is common early on and usually fades. Mints and cold drinks help.
- Headache in the first weeks is common. Fluids and plain acetaminophen usually handle it well enough.
- Mild skin rash or acne can appear. Gentle soap and time usually settle it, but report anything that spreads.
- Some people feel restless or find it harder to concentrate at first. This generally eases within a few weeks.
- Numbness or tingling in the hands or feet is uncommon but should always be reported, not waited out.

⚠️ CALL YOUR PRESCRIBER OR GET HELP RIGHT AWAY IF

- Call **911** for chest pain, trouble breathing, fainting, or a reaction that will not ease.
- Call your prescriber for yellow skin or eyes, dark urine, or upper right belly pain.
- Call your prescriber for numbness, tingling, or weakness in your hands or feet.
- Call **988** if thoughts of ending your life show up. Free help is there all night.

🚫 WHAT TO AVOID

- Alcohol hides in mouthwash, cough and cold syrups, vanilla extract, vinegars, kombucha, wine sauces, and some desserts.
- Read every label on food and medicine. If a bottle says alcohol or ethanol anywhere, check with a pharmacist first.
- The reaction can happen up to **2 weeks** after your last tablet, so the same care is needed well after you stop.
- The antibiotic metronidazole must not be combined with this. Tell every prescriber and pharmacist you are taking it.
- It can raise the level of blood thinners and seizure medicines, so those need watching. Never start one without telling.

⚠️ STOPPING IT SAFELY

- Do not stop on your own to make room for a drink. Call your prescriber instead, even at an awkward hour.
- Protection fades slowly, and the reaction can still hit for up to **2 weeks** after your last tablet. Keep avoiding alcohol.
- If side effects are the problem, say so. Other medicines for alcohol use disorder exist and may suit you better.
- For free, confidential help at any hour of the day or night, call SAMHSA at **1-800-662-4357**.

❓ QUESTIONS TO ASK

- Which foods, mouthwashes, and medicines do I need to avoid?
- What should I do if I have a reaction while I am at home?
- How often will my liver be checked while I take this?
- Would it help to have someone watch me take it each day?

Where this information comes from

MedlinePlus. (2023). *Disulfiram*. National Library of Medicine. <https://medlineplus.gov/druginfo/meds/a682602.html>

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NOTE

Sources are listed in APA 7th edition style. This handout is general information about a medicine, not medical advice, and it does not replace the instructions from your own prescriber or pharmacist. Never start, change, or stop a medicine on your own. If you think you are having a serious reaction, call your prescriber; if you cannot breathe, cannot stay awake, or are thinking of harming yourself, call 911 or 988 right away.