

3.14 Care of people who misuse drugs and alcohol - Alcohol dependence

Stuart 43 was seen last week by the practice nurse for a health check. The practice nurse was concerned that Stuart smelt of alcohol and took blood for liver function testing and a full blood count. You are the doctor phoning Stuart with his results.

Stuart: Crikey doc, those blood tests must be shocking, for you to phone me about them.

Elicit: I guess they're not perfect Stuart. Have you any idea what the tests might show?

Stuart: I assume they show that I'm steadily pickling my liver.

Provide: Wow. I guess you've got some insight then. Would you like some help to avoid getting pickled?

Stuart: Not really doc. I can stop as soon as I want, but there's plenty of time for that.

Provide: Your blood tests suggest that your liver is inflamed, or irritated, and that your bone marrow is pickled too. I'm worried that you might have less time than you think at this rate. Have you heard of the DTs?

Stuart: What do you mean by that?

Provide: If you drink enough, for long enough, you will become dependent on alcohol. When you do without alcohol for more than a few hours, you start to feel nauseated, sweaty, tremble, crave alcohol and feel terrible.

Sometimes you might even get delirium tremens, the DTs, where you become confused, perhaps hallucinate, and even fit. This might happen 3-5 days after stopping drinking if you are dependent.

Elicit: Have you ever had the DTs?

Stuart: I feel dreadful if I miss a day drinking to be honest.

Provide: In that case, please don't stop drinking too quickly.

Elicit: Would you like to know more about the dangers of the demon drink today?

Stuart: Not really doc.

Provide: Understood. I'm worried enough to recommend that we give you some vitamins. Vitamin stores are usually low where alcohol is involved. Low vitamin levels can cause permanent brain damage, but it's easy to prevent this with vitamin tablets or a balanced diet.

Stuart: Brain damage. I thought it was just my liver you were fretting about.

Provide: I've got a list of woes as long as my arm to blame on alcohol. But no time to do that justice today.

Elicit: Perhaps I could ask you to read about alcohol dependence on [patient.info](#)?

Stuart: Alright.