

# **PROTOCOL ON DISULFIRAM (ANTABUSE) PRESCRIBING**

Disulfiram (Antabuse) is a drug used to help people stay abstinent from alcohol. It blocks one of the key metabolising enzymes of alcohol which leads to a build-up of acetaldehyde resulting in flushing, nausea, vomiting and cardiac instability. This so-called "Antabuse reaction", can be dangerous and rarely fatal. Patients therefore must be alcohol free before starting Antabuse and also since the enzymes are inhibited for some time after stopping Antabuse, must remain alcohol free for up to one week.

## **Who may be prescribed Antabuse**

- Generally the Antabuse is given to people who are struggling to remain sober and the fear of an adverse reaction to alcohol helps to support them in their psychosocial treatment to remain sober. Evidence suggests that it is most effective taken in a supervised fashion either with their treatment team or partner. Some patients like to have it as a safety net or use it on a specific occasion e.g. at parties, to help them not to drink.

## **Contra-indications and cautions**

- Due to the nature of the Antabuse reaction, Antabuse should not be prescribed to people with cardiovascular problems, including high blood pressure, history of a stroke or heart attack, evidence of psychosis, epilepsy. Clearly Antabuse is dangerous in overdose and should not be given to people with such a risk in an un-supervised fashion. Caution should also be used in those with a history of medical problems resulting in kidney or liver disease and those with diabetes. It is not recommended in someone who is pregnant.

## **Interactions**

- Antabuse can interact with a number of different drugs and it is recommended that the BNF is checked for the up to date list.

## **How to start prescribing**

- If patients are struggling to remain sober and are motivated to remain abstinent, Antabuse should be considered. It is recommended to be used as an adjunct rather than as a "magic pill". A loading regimen is given in the BNF with the maintenance dose of 200mg daily. Before starting anyone on Antabuse it is recommended that their liver and renal function should be checked and also their blood pressure.
- Patients should be warned about the interaction with alcohol including those in some products that they may not have thought about e.g. aftershaves, antiperspirants, hair dyes/rinses, mouthwashes and cough medicines. In addition, some foods contain alcohol e.g. vinegar, cakes etc.

## **Monitoring**

- Clearly, if someone has drunk on top of Antabuse without an adverse reaction, then its effectiveness is likely to be reduced. Prescribing should stop and alternatives should be reviewed.

The Bristol Specialist Drug & Alcohol Service would be happy to advise on Antabuse prescribing or to assess a patient in whom you are considering Antabuse.