Dear Alice

I decided to stop drinking five days ago. I have been a very heavy drinker for the last few years and I was expecting to feel shaky and have headaches etc., but so far I have just felt extreme tiredness. I can barely get up the energy to move around and I have been sleeping for more than 14 hours a day (compared with only six or seven hours normally). This seems strange to me as I always thought alcohol was a depressant and I was expecting to be full of energy now that I don't have it pumping through me all the time.

Do you think the tiredness could be as a result of not drinking or could this be something else?

Answer

Dear reader,

First of all, congratulations for deciding to stop drinking. People can define "heavy drinking" differently, but regardless of how much you were drinking, quitting is a big commitment to make to yourself, and one that will surely bring results well worth the effort.

The exhaustion you are experiencing may be due to symptoms of alcohol withdrawal. The more heavily a person had been drinking, the more likely they are to develop symptoms when they stop. Withdrawal symptoms include insomnia, fatigue, cravings, and mood instability, all of which can last from three to twelve months. The severity of symptoms is the most acute for the first week or two, and lessen as time goes on.

It sounds like fatigue is the main problem you've encountered, and this may be due to a disrupted sleep cycle, a typical symptom of both chronic drinking and the early stages of withdrawal. Both heavy drinking and its cessation can alter the circadian pattern of sleep, increasing the ratio of REM stage sleep to the more restful deep stage sleep. It's also possible that as your changed sleep cycle causes you to wake up periodically throughout the night, which could make you feel more tired during the day. This alteration of the sleep cycle is usually reversed by 3 months of sobriety, if not sooner.

Your exhaustion could also be due to dehydration. Alcohol dehydrates the body, and the last few years of heavy drinking may have significantly dehydrated you. During this early period of sobriety it might help you to drink lots of water. Eating nourishing food, getting enough (but not excessive) sleep, and treating your body well in other ways can help your body better deal with and recover from withdrawal symptoms. If you feel you need help dealing with the
process of quitting drinking, you might want to seek out therapy or a support group. You can find a local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous [2] meetings on their website. The links to articles below include more information about support groups, and additional details about alcoholism, and what you might expect as your body adjusts to sobriety.

If the exhaustion continues, or you have symptoms strong enough to keep you from functioning normally, you may want to consider visiting a health care provider. They can help you determine how to get your body back on track and/or identify any other medical conditions that are related to your lethargy.

Good luck with your decision, and may deep rest find you soon.

Alice!
Category:
Alcohol & Other Drugs [3]
Alcohol [4]

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Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [11]
Medical Services (CUMC) [12]
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Links