

DRUG HOLIDAYS

Definitions

Tolerance: defined as the progressively decreased responsiveness to a drug. Occurs when the drug is used repeatedly and the body adapts to the continued presence of the drug. As a result, a larger dose of the drug is needed to achieve the effect originally obtained by a smaller dose. It is thought to be due to the formation of excess opioid receptors.

Drug Holiday: is when a patient stops taking a medication(s) for a period of time; anywhere from a few days to several weeks.

Withdrawals: refers to the wide range of symptoms that occur after stopping or dramatically reducing opiate drugs after heavy and prolonged use. Withdrawal symptoms do not occur to patients that use low dose opioids, or those who take the medication sporadically. Contrary to benzodiazepine (example: Valium, Xanax, etc.) or alcohol withdrawals (“*Delirium Tremens*”), opioid withdrawals are not lethal. Withdrawals are the physical manifestation of the body getting rid of the excess receptors.

Purpose

To eliminate tolerance.

Duration of Holiday

14 consecutive days. (2 weeks)

Expected Symptoms

Early symptoms of withdrawal include:

- Agitation
- Anxiety
- Muscle aches
- Increased tearing
- Insomnia
- Runny nose
- Sweating
- Yawning

Late symptoms of withdrawal include:

- Abdominal cramping
- Diarrhea
- Dilated pupils
- Goose bumps
- Nausea
- Vomiting

Opioid withdrawal reactions are very uncomfortable but are not life-threatening. Symptoms usually start within 12 hours of last opioid dose and within 30 hours of last methadone exposure.

Duration of Symptoms

48 to 72 hours for short acting medications and 2 to 14 days for methadone.

Treatment

- Clonidine (Catapres™) or tizanidine (Zanaflex™) for agitation, sweating, tearing, runny nose.
- Promethazine (Phenergan™) for nausea, vomiting.
- NSAIDs for pain.

Benefits

- Improved effectiveness of opioids.
- Decreased opioid dose needed to achieve benefits.
- Improved pain with lesser dose.