

Wernicke's Encephalopathy (WE)



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What is Wernicke's encephalopathy?

Wernicke's encephalopathy (WE for short) is a neurological condition that affects the brain and is caused by an acute thiamine deficiency.

The main symptoms of WE include confusion, poor memory, abnormal eye movements and poor balance.

If WE is not treated early enough it can result in permanent brain damage or severe long-term memory loss.

Why is thiamine important?

The brain is the control centre of the body, but like any working organism or machine, it needs an energy source to keep it running efficiently and effectively.

Our supply of energy comes from the food we eat.

When we eat a healthy diet, our body will convert carbohydrates (found in starchy foods such as potatoes, bread, pasta and rice) into energy. This helps to keep our brain and body healthy.

However, in order to complete this process the body needs thiamine (also called Vitamin B1).

How does alcohol affect diet?

The quality of food in your diet can change significantly as your alcohol intake increases.

- You may notice you have gone from having regular nutritious and healthy meals, to now just snacking on items such as crisps and sandwiches.
- Many heavy drinkers can also lose their appetite completely because alcohol replaces your daily food intake.

This can lead to a low or complete thiamine deficiency within a few weeks. If you have been drinking harmfully for many years, alcohol can also affect your body's ability to absorb much needed nutrients and vitamins.

This can lead to malnutrition and vitamin deficiency.

- Alcohol contains carbohydrates so the more you drink, the more thiamine you need to break it down.
- Alcohol stops you absorbing thiamine properly so you need even more thiamine to account for this.



What are the symptoms of thiamine deficiency?

If your body does not have enough thiamine, it can quickly lead to damage of your brain, muscles and nerves.

Symptoms can include:

- loss of appetite
- loss of memory
- poor balance (ataxic gait)
- confusion and disorientation (to time, place and current events)
- abnormal eye movements – twitching of eyes (Nystagmus) or paralysis of the eye muscles (Ophthalmoplegia)
- blurred vision and / or speech
- slow reaction times.

How is WE treated?

In hospital, you will be treated with IV (intravenous) thiamine, also known as Pabrinex.

You will be given this treatment 3 times a day for 3 days (depending on the length of your stay) or even longer if required.

This method provides the quickest and most effective way to recover from WE, although this is not guaranteed.

It is very important that WE is treated as soon as possible or you could be at risk of long term brain damage or severe memory impairment (Korsakoff's).

How can I help myself?

Your body cannot make thiamine (Vitamin B1) so it has to come from the food you eat. You will find thiamine in foods such as:

- lean meat
- fortified cereal
- beans
- nuts
- brown rice
- green vegetables (spinach, kale and broccoli).



Think about how your current alcohol intake is affecting your health and life.

Talk to the Alcohol Liaison Team for safe advice and referrals for community support when leaving hospital.

Sources of support

We are with you

Drug and alcohol charity for Cornwall

Mon- Fri 9-5

0333 200 0325

<https://www.addaction.org.uk>

AA

Peer support organisation

24 hr Helpline

0845 769 7555

<https://www.aa-cornwall.co.uk>

Adfam

Information and advice for families of alcohol and drug users

020 7928 889

<https://adfam.org.uk>

NHS Choices

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/alcohol-misuse/>

Drinkline

National alcohol helpline

0300 123 1110

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