

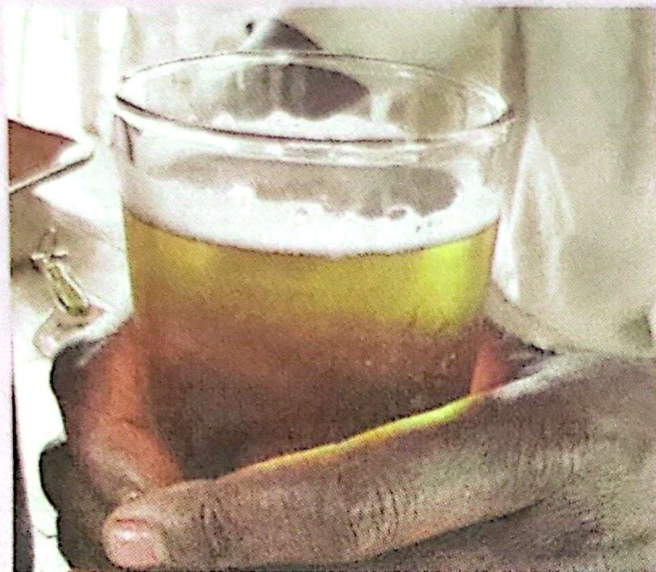
Does quitting alcohol result in hallucinations?

BREAK FREE with **OSCAR BAMUHIGIRE**

Q Dear Counsellor,
Why is it that when some people stop drinking they get hallucinations? How can they be helped?

Angela, Kampala

A Dear Angela,
The question you ask is very important, because explanations can help many alcoholics to quit drinking early enough, before they drink themselves to a point where they have to be admitted into a mental institution for treatment. People who get hallucinations because of drinking are suffering from what we call alcohol withdrawal syndrome, which involves a group of symptoms that tend to occur when someone stops drinking after a prolonged period. They will manifest within six to 48 hours after one's last drink and may progress into a more serious syndrome called delirium tremens (DTs), which is characterised by profound confusion, hallucinations, and severe autonomic nervous system over activity. This usually begins between 48 and 96 hours after one's last drink. Such conditions



It is not an easy to quit alcohol addiction

are treated as medical emergencies because they can be fatal. The explanation behind this is that, heavy alcohol use interferes with the processes that tell certain brain cells to activate or become excited, but also enhances those processes that tell certain brain cells to be restrained (reduce excitement). This way, it messes up how the brain works. When a person stops drinking, their brain experiences a reversal of this effect: the excitatory processes are enhanced, while the inhibitory processes are reduced. This results in the over activation of the central nervous system when

alcohol is withdrawn, in that the brain cells start firing uncontrollably. In other words, the brain is thrown into a state of confusion, because the cells cannot function properly without alcohol. The problem is that, continued use of alcohol can lead to similar symptoms, in what we call alcohol hallucinosis. (alcohol-induced psychotic disorder)

The withdrawals can also result in the

increased production of the adrenal hormones cortisol and norepinephrine, which can be toxic to brain cells. For example, cortisol can specifically damage neurons in the hippocampus, a brain region that controls memory and emotions. People who are experiencing such withdrawals need to be treated by a psychiatrist and must stop drinking to avoid a reoccurrence of symptoms.

Oscar has about 20 years of continuous sobriety and 18 years experience as an addiction counsellor

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