Chapter 37

Acute Withdrawal: General Principles

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Introduction

Patients with substance use disorders are frequent utilizers of medical and psychiatric services in the emergency department. Recognition of common withdrawal syndromes is essential in formulating a differential diagnosis and providing appropriate medical care. In the DSM-5, withdrawal syndromes are uniquely defined for each substance class but share core features in that, (1) they occur after cessation of heavy and prolonged drug use, (2) the cause significant distress or impairment in social, occupational or interpersonal function and, (3) the symptoms cannot be better attributed to another mental or medical disease. In this section the major substance withdrawals include alcohol, benzodiazepine, barbiturate, cannabis, opioid and stimulant (amphetamine-type substances and cocaine). While abrupt cessation of other substances listed in the DSM-5, such as tobacco, can lead to withdrawal, focus has been placed on the most common withdrawal syndromes that can lead to medical concerns.

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