

ALCOHOL AND NEUROPATHY

By William P. Donovan, MD

Although diabetes is the most common cause of peripheral neuropathy, alcohol comes in second. Alcohol (the type we drink is ethanol) is a toxin that poisons all bodily tissue including nerves, regardless of where they are in the body—brain, spinal cord, and the periphery.

In addition to effects on the peripheral nerves—numbness, tingling, and pain--alcohol causes loss of balance, both light touch and deep pressure, as well as vibratory sense and balance. Effects on the spinal cord also include loss of balance and unsteady gait. Effects on the brain range from total amnesia in Korsakoff's Disease to tremor, blackouts, hallucinations and dementia.

Going through this list of alcohol-related problems reminds me of a patient of mine who appeared unconcerned—until I mentioned “impotence”. Yes, alcohol can decrease sexual desire and function.

For those who do not suffer alcohol addiction, and can drink moderately, the generally accepted limit is one a day for women and two drinks a day for men. For those who have a serious problem, the adverse effects are often complicated by inadequate diet and vitamin deficiency.

For those with neuropathy not thought to be alcohol related, alcohol can make the problem worse. Although my neurologist has diagnosed my neuropathy as being related to borderline Type II diabetic neuropathy, my symptoms are worsened by factors other than sugar: heavy bodied red wine, anti-cancer drug 5FU, statins and metformin—to name those I know about.