

HOW NOT TO DO IBOGAINE

I'm a doctor. I should have known this would happen. I started using Vicodin for "pain," as prescribed by a physician. It worked well. Too well. It helped the underlying psychic pain better than anything else. It allowed me to be less serious in social situations. I was naïve enough to think I could control my use. I did, for a long time, until life got tough. Then, it seemed opioids were the only thing that kept me from hurting, whether mentally or physically. Like millions of other people, I became dependent.

I eventually needed opioids every day, or the pain was severe and the withdrawal symptoms miserable. The ups and downs of short-acting pharmaceutical opioids were brutal. The rollercoaster ride became intolerable, so I decided to take **buprenorphine**. It is a partial agonist and marketed to help with opioid dependence as follows:

1. Lower abuse potential
2. A ceiling effect at higher doses
3. Greater safety in overdose compared with opioid full agonists
4. A lower level of physical dependence (less withdrawal discomfort)

All the above are true except the last point. I believed that I would be able to wean off buprenorphine slowly over 6-12 months. It wasn't long before I realized that I felt awful for weeks every time I tried to drop my dose. I soon stopped trying. I became resigned. "At least it's better than Vicodin." It was, and it wasn't.

After four years on buprenorphine, I wanted to be opioid-free. I had done the hard work (*pretreatment*) of improving my emotional and psychological health. I had worked through my childhood trauma. I started a regular yoga and meditation practice. I had weaned off my antidepressant and most of my other medications. On a podcast, I listened to the promise of ibogaine treatment. I had never heard of it but was intrigued. I contacted an ibogaine center in Mexico.

They informed me that I couldn't take buprenorphine for two months before ibogaine treatment. I wouldn't go through withdrawals as morphine would take its place. They recommended an EKG and some blood work which I completed. They had a basic intake form but didn't do any pretreatment— little communication in the months leading up to my stay. I showed up at the Cancun airport to meet the owner/operator of this center. Little did I know a week from hell was about to begin.

One by one, the problems emerged. First, somehow I had misread how to pay the balance of the treatment. The owner accused me of "not wanting to pay" and insisted that "you could leave now if there is a problem." It felt like a shakedown, like a drug deal gone wrong. He had the ibogaine, and I better pay up or leave! He never asked me any questions to determine what had happened. It was distressing. We eventually remedied the misunderstanding, I paid the balance, but I never felt comfortable again during my six-day stay.

I arrived on a Monday. We did lab tests and a urine screen on Tuesday. I thought we would do ibogaine on Wednesday since I was leaving on Saturday. For some reason, never revealed, I did

not receive ibogaine until Thursday morning. They delayed with trips to the massage therapist and dinners at the clubhouse. The night before our experience began, we had a thirty-minute conversation with someone regarding what to expect from ibogaine and a short discussion on goals.

Thursday morning, a nurse gave me a test dose, and, within 45 minutes, I felt "drunk" but had no other effects. They then gave me the flood dose. I don't even remember how much – I had given up my agency and had chosen to trust them. Within 1-2 hours, I suddenly vomited without warning. I told them I had wet my pants while vomiting. They did nothing about that. I lay in my damp bed for hours. Once I was done tripping, I was finally walked to the bathroom to change my clothes and for them to change the bed.

While tripping, I remained in bed, with music playing through the headphones, eyes covered by a mask, and hallucinating. I had some visions. I had some insights. It wasn't that amazing. I didn't have any expectations going into the trip other than what they had told me the night before. After about six hours, I was more consciously aware, and the real nightmare began.

I started to have significant opioid withdrawals. I was in severe pain, and my legs were endlessly restless and stiff. I could not get comfortable. I also kept vomiting brilliant green bile every couple of hours. I had significant nausea and heartburn from the vomiting. All I could do was moan, groan, and move my legs in bed, flipping repeatedly. ***I now KNEW the suffering of opioid withdrawals.*** I had never experienced it before. I had always been too careful and never ran out of my medications.

Because ibogaine interacts with so many other medications with potential cardiotoxic effects, the team gave me nothing for my symptoms. I spent 12 hours in complete misery. I had no fluids for over 24 hours. They refused to provide me with IV hydration. They wanted me to drink, but the nausea was overwhelming. I noticed my breathing was getting fast due to dehydration (metabolic acidosis). They still refused IV hydration. They wanted me to eat, but no way I could. Finally, they gave me a little Valium and Zantac. I could sip on ginger ale and eat a few potato chips at about hour 36.

I spent the entire second day in bed. The owner told me, "You are doing really well, given you still had buprenorphine in your urine when you arrived." WHAT? Why didn't he share that before the ibogaine treatment? I was not doing well. Friday was endless. I could not sleep at all. They had me pack my bags for the airport on Saturday – they dropped me off at noon for a 5 pm flight. I was all alone, weak, and exhausted. I ended up crying at a table out of sheer despair.

The hell started in Mexico, and the months that followed were agonizing. The center offered no aftercare. They did not seem to care about me once discharged. I had to fend for myself. I developed diarrhea and called them to get advice. They were not helpful. I figured since it was Mexico, it was likely travelers' diarrhea. I took Cipro for a day, and it seemed to get better. However, within a couple of weeks, I had watery diarrhea for an hour every morning after eating breakfast.

The first month after returning, I had severe restless legs, horrible insomnia, fatigue, weakness, but NO DEPRESSION. The promise of noribogaine is true. Despite my physical complaints, I was mentally able to tolerate it. Slowly, after about two months, the noribogaine wore off, and I spiraled headfirst into a depression. I had lost 15 pounds, I could barely work, and nothing was improving.

I had an “ah-ha!” moment when I suddenly realized the cause of my diarrhea – GIARDIA – an intestinal parasite I acquired from Mexico. All the symptoms were consistent. I contracted it from the water. I self-treated with the proper medication, and it suddenly improved. However, the damage inflicted on my intestines took over a year to heal.

I had a very long road back to health, mentally and physically. I had no support, no aftercare, nothing. I was on my own. Once I recovered, I decided to share my story and help others. I want to make sure NO ONE has the experience I did.

In the next blog, I will advise on the RIGHT WAY TO DO IBOGAINE.