

Coping With Alcohol Withdrawal



**Central and North West London
NHS Foundation Trust
Addictions Services**



Alcohol withdrawal

When a person is dependent on alcohol and suddenly stops drinking there are certain recognised symptoms that they usually experience.

These may include shakes, sweats, feeling sick/ vomiting, difficulties with eating and sleeping, irritability, anxiety or feelings of panic.

Withdrawal symptoms may vary in intensity from one person to another.

The symptoms usually occur within 4-12 hours after your last alcoholic drink, and are often at their most severe 48-72 hours after your last drink.

Some symptoms can be severe, such as delirium tremens* and withdrawal fits, but these occur in the minority of cases and with careful monitoring of reduction or the use of prescribed medication, they can be prevented.

(*The DTs are more than the shakes, ie confusion and visual, auditory, tactile hallucinations, illusions and marked tremor:)

It can be dangerous to stop drinking suddenly, so to avoid dangers of severe withdrawal symptoms, we strongly recommend medical assistance for detoxification.

If you are attempting to do this yourself, reduce your drinking gradually over the course of a several days to a week.

If in doubt consult your doctor about supervised detoxification.

- **TIME OFF**

If you are working, try and take at least a week off. Your GP may be willing to provide a sickness certificate.

You may feel unwell, and it may be helpful to arrange for someone to monitor you at home, especially if this is your first detoxification. Explain to your friends and/or family the process you will be going through so you can enlist their support and understanding as you may feel anxious or irritable.

- **SAFETY**

In the early stages you may feel shaky, anxious and/or drowsy. Avoid anything which may cause an accident or injury e.g. driving, physical work, climbing ladders etc. Care must be taken with lit cigarettes and handling hot water or hot drinks. You should also avoid swimming and take care when bathing.

DO NOT DRIVE OR OPERATE MACHINERY.

- **DAILY STRUCTURE**

It is helpful to find activities to occupy your mind and to keep you physically active. Plan your days by choosing activities that will keep you busy and interested but that are not stressful. Try pleasant activities such as hobbies, reading, exercising, but also simple practical things like tidying or light DIY.

There may be drop-in services and self help groups local to you that offer support and a range of activities - these are worth trying.

- **RELAXATION**

Ask for further information regarding relaxation, which may help with anxiety, irritability, cravings and sleep. Relaxation groups and the range of complimentary therapy treatments available are really helpful during detoxification, and can promote your well-being.



- **SLEEP**

Alcohol disrupts your sleep, and this will continue to be affected for a couple of weeks. Most people feel frustrated that the sleep pattern takes sometime to adjust, but with time your body should adjust to its natural rhythm. Try not to sleep during the day, although you should rest as much as possible. It is also important to avoid tea & coffee in the evening as the caffeine will keep you anxious and also keep you awake at night. A milky sugary drink and a warm bath before you go to bed may help you sleep. You should reduce your nicotine and caffeine intake as much as possible during the evening.

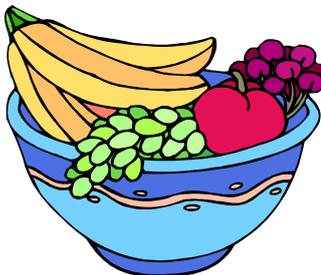
Getting into a relaxing routine before bedtime is helpful, and you may find that listening to music, relaxation or some light reading may be helpful. Having a regular time for getting up in the mornings and being active during the day will help you sleep at night.

- **HYGIENE**

You may find that excessive sweating may occur and we recommend that you wash and bathe a couple of times a day for your comfort. Having a bath may also help with relaxation.

- **CRAVINGS**

You may experience 'cravings' which take the form of thoughts and urges to drink alcohol. These feelings may vary in intensity and they are often time limited (around 20 mins). They will subside in intensity like waves and during these times it is important to have something to help you distract your thoughts from these feelings.



- **DIET**

It is important that you drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration. Water is best for this and you could add squash, but orange juice may irritate your stomach and cause nausea. Milk is good for digestive problems. Meals should be small, regular and include plenty of protein and vitamins eg. fruit, vegetables, soup, fish, eggs, cheese. Try to avoid sugary or fatty foods as these will add strain on your digestive system.

If you have a craving for sugar, try dried fruit for snacks rather than sweets.

***This booklet has been designed to help
you understand and cope with the
symptoms you may experience
now you have decided
to stop drinking***

What is withdrawal?

Alcohol is a **depressant drug** - which means that your nervous system has to work at an increased level to counteract the presence of alcohol maintain its correct level of functioning. When the alcohol is removed, your body continues to function at this increased level, and thus withdrawal symptoms are experienced, which is why it is sometimes necessary to prescribe a drug to help the body adjust to normal.

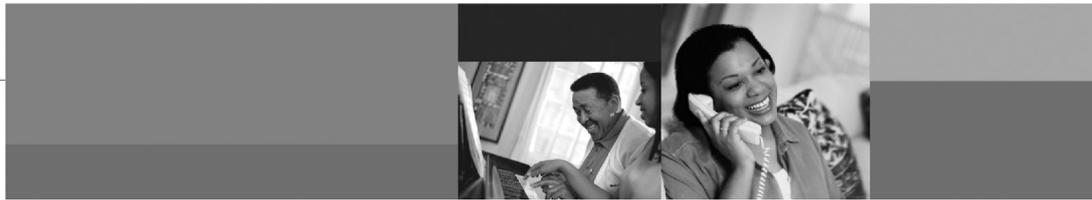
Withdrawal symptoms can vary in severity depending on how much and how long you have been drinking alcohol and also on how high your **tolerance** is. Tolerance can be described as the way your body gets used to the effects of alcohol and usually over time people need to drink or more to get the same effects.

For more information on the above please speak to your key-worker, nurse or doctor.

SOME USEFUL CONTACTS

- AA: 020 7833 0022
- DRINKLINE: 0800 917 8282
- SAMARITANS: 0345 90 90 90
- www.downyourdrink.org.uk

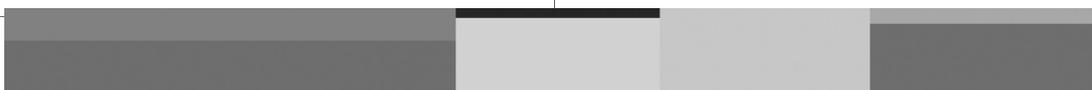
LOCAL SERVICE CONTACTS



Alcohol Detoxification Programmes



**Central and North West London
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Assisted detoxification

Detoxification refers to the process of clearing the alcohol from your system and of your body adapting to being alcohol free.

Our service prescribes medicines to assist with withdrawal symptoms but also we aim to offer psychological support as you adjust to becoming alcohol-free. This is available through group support as well as one-to-one counselling.

We believe it is important that you are fully informed of the detox process before you start and also that you can make changes in your daily routine. If you have any questions, please ask. We advise you to continue with support during and after detoxification is completed.

Before you start an out-patient detox with our service it may be helpful for you to gradually reduce your alcohol intake as much as possible, for example by switching to alcohol with a lower percentage of alcohol by volume (which should be shown on the bottles or cans).

Planning how you will spend your time and who with will be crucial to your success. (See also the leaflet "Coping With Alcohol Withdrawal")

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your key-worker, nurse or doctor

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A detoxification programme is only the first step to treatment. The next stage is STAYING ABSTINENT. Your pharmacist and or key worker will discuss with you some of the treatment options available to help you maintain your abstinence e.g. individual counselling, additional medication to assist with cravings, group therapy, self-help groups day or residential programmes and so on.

- **Out-patient alcohol detoxification**

Community Detoxification Programme is to assist your withdrawal from alcohol safely and without having to be admitted to hospital. During the first 7-10 days we ask you to attend the service daily so we can monitor the extent of your withdrawal symptoms, and adjust the daily prescribing. We prescribe chlordiazepoxide for the management of withdrawal symptoms.

To ensure the best treatment for you, we will be contacting your GP to inform him/her of the detoxification programme. This is important because if you have any problems in the evening or at the weekend when our service is closed, you can contact your GP who will be aware of the treatment you are receiving.

- **MEDICATION**

It is important that you take your medication as prescribed, and that you do not take these with alcohol.

Make a note of withdrawal symptoms or any side effects of medication and discuss these with the nurse, doctor or pharmacist when you attend for monitoring.

Our aim is to assist you to remove the alcohol from your system, avoiding any major withdrawal symptoms or side effects.



