Coping with Alcohol Withdrawal

Information for patients, relatives and carers

ⓘ For more information, please contact:

Substance Misuse Liaison Service
Tel: 01904 726559
Email: substancemisuseliaisonservice@york.nhs.uk
The York Hospital, Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE

Caring with pride
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Alcohol withdrawal

Alcohol is a depressant drug, which means your nervous system has to work at an increased level to counteract the presence of alcohol and maintain its correct level of functioning. The body gets used to receiving alcohol at a certain level and frequency. When the alcohol is removed your body continues to function at this increased level and this makes you feel symptoms we call ‘withdrawal symptoms’.

The severity of withdrawal symptoms depends on how much/how long you have been drinking and your tolerance. Tolerance can be described as the way your body gets used to the effects of alcohol. Usually over time, people need to drink more alcohol to get the same effect.

Warning

It can be dangerous to stop drinking suddenly, so to avoid the dangers of severe withdrawal symptoms we strongly recommend seeking medical advice before stopping drinking.

If you are attempting to do this yourself reduce your drinking gradually over the course of several weeks.
What does alcohol withdrawal feel like?

Alcohol withdrawal is different for every person. However when a person is dependent on alcohol and suddenly stops drinking there are certain recognised symptoms which they can experience.

These may include shaking, sweating, feeling sick/vomiting, difficulties with eating and sleeping, irritability, anxiety or feelings of panic. The symptoms usually occur within six to 12 hours after your last alcoholic drink and are often at their most severe 48-72 hours after your last drink. Most people start to feel better after this and most symptoms resolve after four or five days.

Most people stop drinking without requiring any medication even if they experience some mild to moderate symptoms of withdrawal, as described above. However some symptoms can be severe, such as delirium tremens, confusion, hallucinations and withdrawal fits/seizures, but these occur in the minority of cases and with careful monitoring of reduction in alcohol intake or the use of prescribed medication they can be prevented.

If you experience severe symptoms, you should seek urgent medical advice from your GP.
Whilst in hospital

You may receive medication to help with your withdrawal symptoms if needed. This treatment usually lasts for a few days and generally reduces every day. This medication stops when you leave hospital.

You should **never** drink alcohol if prescribed medication to help with withdrawal symptoms, to do so is dangerous and could cause breathing problems or even death.

**If you are determined to stop drinking, several things may help:**

**Cut down gradually**

Below are some tips on how to reduce your alcohol intake safely and gradually:

- **Remember you are drinking to control withdrawal symptoms, not to get intoxicated.**
- It is important not to cut down so quickly that you end up getting severe withdrawal symptoms, but also not so slowly so that you never stop!
- Once you have worked out how many units a day you drink, try to reduce by ten percent each week.
- Do not assume you have to drink straight away after waking up. Try drinking nothing until you notice withdrawal symptoms.
• Try to drink only when you start to feel yourself withdraw and then drink approximately two units at a time. Wait 20-30 minutes for the alcohol to take effect and repeat this process each time you get withdrawal symptoms.

• If you experience disturbed or disrupted sleep due to withdrawal symptoms, you could try a double dose before bed.

• As you reduce your daily alcohol intake, your withdrawal symptoms should become less severe.

• Keeping a daily record of your symptoms may help you keep track of your progress and give you a guide of how much to reduce the next week. There is an example of a diary and unit tracker on page 10.

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

• **Support**
  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 they understand and can support you.
• **Safety**  
In the early stages you may feel shaky, anxious and/or drowsy. Avoid anything which may cause and 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.

• **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 are not stressful. Try pleasant activities such as hobbies, reading, exercising, but also simple practical things like tidying and 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**  
Relaxation may help with anxiety, irritability, cravings and sleep. There are a range of self-help techniques and complimentary therapies which may help you to relax. These can be really useful during detoxification and will promote your sense of well-being. Contact your local alcohol service for more information.
• **Sleep**
  Alcohol disrupts your sleep and this will continue to be affected for a couple of weeks. Most people feel frustrated that their sleep pattern takes some time 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 and coffee and reduce nicotine, in the evening as caffeine may make you anxious and affect your ability to sleep.

A milky, sugary drink and a warm bath before you go to bed may help you get to sleep.

Establishing a regular night-time routine and having a regular time to go to bed and get up as well as being active during the day could also help establish a healthy sleep pattern as soon as possible.

• **Hygiene**
  You may find that you sweat a lot during your detoxification. Washing or bathing more frequently than usual may help you stay comfortable.

• **Cravings**
  You may experience ‘cravings’ which take the form of thoughts or urges to drink alcohol. These feelings may vary in intensity and are often time limited (only lasting 20-30 minutes at the most). They will gradually lessen in intensity. Having something to distract you at these times may help you to cope.
• Diet
Many people report that their appetite reduces when they drink alcohol excessively. Nutrition is important for your recovery and your appetite should recover with time as long as you continue trying to eat. It is important that you drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration. Water is best for this, you could add squash. 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 i.e. fresh fruit, vegetables, soup, fish, eggs and cheese. Try to avoid sugary or fatty foods as these are harder for your body to process. If you crave sugar try dried fruit for snacks rather than sweets.

You may also need additional thiamine vitamin supplements in hospital and/or at home. In hospital thiamine is given by injection or as a tablet. Taking thiamine as prescribed is very important to reduce complications such as memory loss, confusion and mobility problems.

Getting help will increase your chances of stopping and staying off alcohol
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If you do find you are over the recommended limits (Both men and women should not regularly drink more than 14 units per week spread over three or more days) you may want to start cutting back.

Total

Daily average
Driving

All applicants and licence holders have a legal responsibility to inform the Driver and Vehicle Licencing Authority (DVLA) of any injury or illness that would have a likely impact on safe driving ability. Alcohol and drugs have an influence on the brain and will affect driving performance, therefore can seriously affect your ability to drive. It is your responsibility to inform the DVLA if you have problematic alcohol or drug use.

The DVLA will then make a decision on your fitness to drive and may request medical information.

DVLA contact details:
Tel: 0800 790 6806
Email: eftd@dvla.gsi.gov.uk
Address: Drivers’ Medical Enquiries, DVLA, Swansea, SA99 1TU
Where can I get more help?

**Drinkline:** 0300 1231110

A free and confidential helpline for people concerned about their own or someone else’s drinking. Available: Monday- Friday 9am-8pm or Saturday to Sunday 11am-4pm.

**York Drug and Alcohol Service:** 01904 464680

3 Blossom Street
York
YO24 1AU
Email: york@changing-lives.org.uk

Integrated community drug and alcohol treatment and support, including needle exchange for York.

**North Yorkshire Horizons:** 01723 330730
Website: http://www.nyhorizons.org.uk/

Operates from five main Hubs across the county:
Harrogate - 7 North park Road, HG1 5PD
Northallerton - 5 The Applegarth, DL7 8LZ
Selby - 74-76 Gowthorpe, YO8 4ET
Scarborough - 50-60 Castle Road, YO11 1XE
Skipton - Mill Bridge House, 4A Mill Bridge, BD23 1NJ

Integrated community drug and alcohol treatment and support for North Yorkshire.
Listening in order to improve ● Always doing what we can to be helpful

**East Riding partnership:** 01482 336675

7 Baker Street, Hull, HU2 8HP

Integrated community drug and alcohol treatment and support for East Riding.

**Changing Lives (Oaktrees):** 01904 621776
Website: www.changing-lives.org.uk

Bowes Morrell House
111, Walmgate, York, YO1 9UA

A non-residential, abstinence based structured day programme for York.

**Alcoholics Anonymous:** 0800 9177650
Website: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Regular meetings take place every week in York and throughout North Yorkshire and there is a meeting in York Hospital every Sunday, 11am-12.15pm.

**Al-Anon Family Groups:** 020 74030888 (10am-10pm)
Website: www.al-anonuk.org.uk

National help and support for families and friends.

**Frank:** 0300 1236600
A free and confidential 24 hour helpline about drugs
Narcotics Anonymous: 0300 9991212
Website: http://ukna.org/

Regular meetings take place in York and throughout North Yorkshire.

York Carers Centre
Website: http://www.yorkcarerscentre.co.uk/

Substance Misuse Support Group: 01904 715490

Information, advice and support for carers affected by alcohol and substance misuse. Regular monthly meetings held on the third Wednesday of the month, 1.30 to 3.30pm in the Tesco community room, Tesco, Askham Bar, York, YO24 1LW.

For more information please contact:

The Substance Misuse Liaison Service: York Hospital
Tel: 01904 726559
Email: substancemisuseliaisonservice@york.nhs.uk

A&E Alcohol Link Workers: Scarborough Hospital
Tel: 01723 330780
Mobile: 07730 598 879
Tell us what you think of this leaflet

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact: Substance Misuse Liaison Service, The York Hospital, Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE, telephone 01904 726559 or email substancemisuseliaisonservice@york.nhs.uk.

Teaching, Training and Research

Our Trust is committed to teaching, training and research to support the development of health and healthcare in our community. Healthcare students may observe consultations for this purpose. You can opt out if you do not want students to observe. We may also ask you if you would like to be involved in our research.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS offers impartial advice and assistance to patients, their relatives, friends and carers. We can listen to feedback (positive or negative), answer questions and help resolve any concerns about Trust services.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email pals@york.nhs.uk.

An answer phone is available out of hours.
Providing care together in York, Scarborough, Bridlington, Malton, Selby and Easingwold communities

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Braille Audio e.g. CD
Large print Electronic

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