



York Teaching Hospital
NHS Foundation Trust

Coping with Alcohol Withdrawal

Information for patients, relatives and carers

① For more information, please contact:

Substance Misuse Liaison Service

York Hospital

Tel: 01904 726559

Email: substancemisuselianservice@york.nhs.uk

ED Alcohol Link Workers: Scarborough Hospital

Tel: 07968 693286

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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, without the need for medication.

Occasionally, more serious symptoms occur which need medical help:

- Seizures (fits) even if you have not had one before.
- Hallucinations (seeing, hearing or feeling things that aren't there).
- Confusion (about where you are, what time it is, who you are with).
- Poor coordination and unsteadiness on your feet.

These symptoms 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 or NHS 111.

Am I at risk of having alcohol withdrawal symptoms?

- Do you drink over 15 units of alcohol every day? (This is around a half bottle of spirits, one and half bottles of wine, six pints of regular strength beer, three cans super lager or two litres of strong cider.)
- Have you had withdrawal symptoms in the past when cutting back or stopping alcohol? Symptoms sometimes take up to a few days to start.
- Do you drink alcohol soon after you get up to relieve shakes, or sweats?

If you fall into any or all of these categories, it is likely you will need to do some planning if want to stop or cut down your drinking.

When is the right time to cut down or stop alcohol?

The decision about whether the time is right to make any change to your drinking is up to you. You may decide to keep going as you have been, try to cut back or to stop.

Start with a drinking diary: write down each drink you have when you have it and find out how many units it has in it. Start measuring your drinks if you are drinking from a bottle of spirits or wine.

Unit calculators are easily available on the Internet or via phone apps. Alternatively the % alcohol on the side of the bottle or can represents the amount of units in a litre.

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 no more than 10% of your total units every four days, particularly if you are drinking more than 25 units per day.
- If you start to experience withdrawal symptoms, this means you are cutting down too rapidly. Stabilise for one week and then cut down by 10% each week.
- You may find it is the drinks in the middle of the day which are easier to cut back to start with, so keep your early and late “doses” stable in the start of detox
- 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 13.
- **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 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.

- **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 intravenous or intramuscular injection or as a tablet. Taking thiamine as prescribed is very important to reduce complications such as memory loss, confusion and mobility problems.

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 generally 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.

Getting help will increase your chances of stopping and staying off alcohol

Drink diary and unit tracker

| Day | Type of drink | Number of drinks | Units | Total units for day |
|---|---------------|----------------------|-------|---------------------|
| Example | | | | |
| Monday | | | | |
| Tuesday | | | | |
| Wednesday | | | | |
| Thursday | | | | |
| Friday | | | | |
| Saturday | | | | |
| Sunday | | | | |
| 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: 0300 790 6806

<https://www.gov.uk/contact-the-dvla>

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.

Changing Lives: 01904 464680

3 Blossom Street

York

YO24 1AU

<https://www.changing-lives.org.uk/>

Integrated community drug and alcohol treatment and support.

Changing Lives (Oaktrees): 01904 621776

<https://www.changing-lives.org.uk/>

Bowes Morrell House

111, Walmgate, York, YO1 9UA

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

North Yorkshire Horizons: 01723 330730

<https://www.nyhorizons.org.uk/>

Free call 08000 14 14 80

Operates from five main Hubs across the county:

Harrogate - 7 North park Road, HG1 5PD

Northallerton - 5 The Applegarth, DL7 8LZ

Selby - 4 Park Street, Selby YO8 4PW

Scarborough - 56-60 Castle Road, YO11 1XE

Skipton - Mill Bridge House, 4A Mill Bridge, BD23 1NJ

Integrated community drug and alcohol treatment and support for adults and young people in North Yorkshire.

East Riding Partnership:

<https://www.humber.nhs.uk/services/east-riding-partnership.htm>

Operates from three hubs covering the East Riding geographical area and provides drop-in services for adults and young people:

The Central Hub

7 Baker Street

Hull, HU2 8HP

Tel: 01482 336675

The West Hub

100 Boothferry Road

Goole, DN14 6AE

Tel: 01405 608210

The East Hub
Becca House
27 St John's Avenue
Bridlington, YO16 4ND
Tel: 01262 458200

Alcoholics Anonymous: 0800 9177650
<https://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: 0800 0086811
<https://www.al-anonuk.org.uk/>
National help and support for families and friends.

Narcotics Anonymous: 0300 9991212
<https://ukna.org/>
Regular meetings take place in York and throughout North Yorkshire.

Talk to Frank: 0300 1236600
<https://www.talktofrank.com/>
A free and confidential 24 hour helpline about drugs

York Carers Centre
<https://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 are held.

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
substancemisuselianservice@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.

Leaflets in alternative languages or formats

Please telephone or email if you require this information in a different language or format, for example Braille, large print or audio.

如果你要求本資 不同的 或 式提供 , 電
或發電

Jeżeli niniejsze informacje potrzebne są w innym języku lub formacie, należy zadzwonić lub wysłać wiadomość e-mail

Bu bilgileri değişik bir lisanda ya da formatta istiyorsanız lütfen telefon ediniz ya da e-posta gönderiniz

Telephone: 01904 725566

Email: access@york.nhs.uk

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