

Getting through Alcohol Withdrawal

Please note this factsheet is only a guide. If you are thinking about managing your alcohol use seek advice from your doctor to get support tailored to your needs.
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What is alcohol?

Alcohol is a depressant drug that slows down messages between the brain and the body.

What is a 'standard drink'?

One 'standard drink' contains 10 grams of alcohol. On average, this is how much alcohol the human body can process in one hour. Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends that healthy men and women should drink no more than 10 standard drinks per week and no more than 4 standard drinks on any one day, to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol.

What is alcohol withdrawal?

Alcohol withdrawal is a group of symptoms that occur after stopping or decreasing the amount of alcohol you use. Alcohol withdrawal symptoms may be physical, mental or emotional, and are temporary.

FOR SOME PEOPLE, PARTICULARLY THOSE WHO HAVE CONSUMED LARGE AMOUNTS OF ALCOHOL FOR A LONG TIME, WITHDRAWAL COMPLICATIONS CAN INCLUDE DELIRIUM (A SUDDEN CONFUSED STATE) AND SEIZURES

It is therefore very important that you talk to your doctor to have your risk for these complications assessed and managed before any alcohol withdrawal.

What to expect in withdrawal

Different people will experience alcohol withdrawal differently. Some people may find alcohol withdrawal more challenging than others. If you are finding alcohol withdrawal hard see your doctor to get support.

How long does withdrawal last?

Alcohol withdrawal symptoms typically start 6-24 hours after stopping alcohol. Symptoms reach their peak between days 1-3 of withdrawal, and start to disappear after 5-10 days.

What are the common alcohol withdrawal symptoms?

Common physical symptoms of alcohol withdrawal include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Tremors
- Rapid or irregular heart beat
- Sweating
- Aches and pains
- Fatigue
- Seizures (uncommon)

Common emotional and mental symptoms of alcohol withdrawal include:

- Agitation, irritability or anxiety
- Sleep difficulties and sleep disturbance
- Low mood
- Hallucinations (uncommon)
- Delirium (uncommon)

What are the benefits of quitting alcohol?

There are many health problems that are linked to alcohol use, including liver disease, heart disease cancers and dementia. If you manage your alcohol use you reduce your risk of developing these problems. Stopping or reducing alcohol use can also improve your mood, sleep and energy levels. It will help you to work better, think more clearly and protect your relationship with others.

Women who are pregnant, breastfeeding or trying to get pregnant are strongly advised not to drink alcohol. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy will increase the risk of miscarriage, stillbirth and perinatal death. Consuming alcohol during pregnancy can also cause foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), a serious condition causing development defects in affected children.

How can I manage my alcohol use?

Step 1: Get help by talking to your doctor. Your doctor can advise if you should attend a residential detox to manage your alcohol withdrawal. A residential detox typically lasts 7 days, and is a safer environment to stop alcohol if you are at risk of experiencing an alcohol withdrawal seizure or delirium. Alternatively, if it is medically safe for you to withdraw at home your doctor may be able to link you in with recovery support and/or prescribe you medication to manage your withdrawal symptoms.

Step 2: Talk to someone and get support. The following services are available to you:

- **Drug and Alcohol Counselling:** Call the *National Alcohol and Other Drug Helpline* (1800 250 015) to be linked in with counselling in your area
- **Online Counselling:** Head to *Counselling Online* (www.counsellingonline.org.au) for web-based drug and alcohol counselling.
- **Peer Support:** Is available from *Alcoholics Anonymous* (www.aa.org.au) or *SMART Recovery* (www.smartrecoveryaustralia.com.au)
- **Smartphone Apps:** Can help you to manage your alcohol use. Examples include include *Daybreak – Alcohol Support App* and *Drinks Meter*

Step 3: Get rid of any remaining alcohol in your home to reduce your chances of a lapse.

Step 4: If you have difficulty quitting, talk to your doctor about starting anti-craving medication (naltrexone or acamprosate) to help you manage your alcohol use. These medications have been shown to help people stop drinking, and stay abstinent. They are safe, effective and do not make you sick if you drink alcohol whilst taking them.

What strategies can I use to manage my alcohol use?

- Stay positive and be kind to yourself while you are experiencing alcohol withdrawal
- Spend time with friends and family who support you
- Avoid situations where you used to use alcohol and find new activities to replace drinking
- Set goals and rewards for using the money you save by quitting
- Good **nutrition, exercise** and **sleep** will help your body recover and ease some of the discomfort caused by withdrawal symptoms.
- Warm baths, massage, light exercise and deep breathing can help with aches and pains
- Sleep difficulties are common in withdrawal so follow these tips to help you sleep:
 - Try to go to bed around the same time each night, and set an alarm to wake at the same time each day
 - Go to sleep when you feel tired
 - If you do not fall asleep within 30 minutes of being in bed get back up and return to bed only when you are feeling tired

What strategies can I use to manage my alcohol use? (continued)

- Expect to have cravings to drink alcohol; they are a difficult but normal part of withdrawal. Use the 4 D's approach anytime you experience cravings:
 - **Delay** acting on the urge to drink and remind yourself why you wanted to stop drinking in the first place. The urge will pass after a few minutes on its own.
 - **Deep breathe.** Take long, slow breaths in and out. Repeat this three times.
 - **Do something else.** Take your mind off alcohol by doing something else: put on some music, keep your hands busy, or go for a walk
 - **Drink water.** Sip water slowly to beat cravings for alcohol. You'll feel better both physically and mentally.
- Most relapses occur within the first week after drinking. Having a specific plan or activity for each day can help you get through the withdrawal period and stay on track.
- Consider getting support for any stresses in your life. Stress can make your withdrawal worse than it actually is. Talk to your doctor or consider getting help from a counsellor.
- Ask your doctor about anti-craving medications (e.g. naltrexone, acamprosate) that may help you quit.
- Know that sometimes people undertake a number of alcohol withdrawal attempts before succeeding. If you keep this in mind and keep going you will succeed.