

# Hospital to Home Detoxification

An information guide



# Hospital to Home Detoxification

## What is alcohol withdrawal?

When a person repeatedly uses a substance such as alcohol, their body develops a dependency upon the substance. The neurons in their brain adapt to repeated exposure to the substance in such a way that it can only function normally when the substance is present.

If the intake of the substance is stopped or drastically reduced, the brain must adjust to a sudden change in the levels of biochemical it produces. An alteration in the production of these chemicals will temporarily affect the way a person feels physically and how they perceive the world around them. This sudden change is called withdrawal syndrome.

Alcohol withdrawal syndrome occurs when the blood alcohol level falls below a certain threshold in patients with a long history of excessive alcohol consumption. Some patients are not troubled by alcohol withdrawal but many will develop an acute withdrawal syndrome upon stopping or significantly reducing alcohol intake.

Withdrawal symptoms typically develop within 6-8 hours after your last drink, as the effects of the alcohol wears off. Symptoms may vary in severity, but commonly peak at 10-30 hours, usually subsiding by 40-50 hours. However, the craving for alcohol may last much longer.

Withdrawal symptoms typically include feeling sick, trembling, sweating, headaches, craving for alcohol and just feeling awful. You may feel nervous or anxious and have difficulty sleeping. More severe symptoms may include seizures, seeing or hearing things that others do not (hallucinations), and delirium tremens (DT's). The effects of alcohol withdrawal differ for each individual and cannot be predicted. Some people may not experience any symptoms,

whilst others may experience different symptoms at different severities.

### **What should I expect from a hospital to home alcohol detoxification?**

Detoxification involves taking a short course of medicine which helps to alleviate withdrawal symptoms experienced when you stop drinking alcohol.

It is important to remember that medication used for a detox cannot make you stop drinking; it simply helps you feel better whilst your body adjusts to not having any alcohol. You need determination and will power to succeed.

Having commenced detoxification already in hospital, you will have been assessed for alcohol dependence and commenced on the appropriate medications. However, you may be medically fit for discharge from hospital before your detoxification regime of medication has completed. In this instance, you will be considered for a hospital to home detoxification.

If your physical and mental health are stable, you have a safe and supportive home environment, do not take illicit substances, are not pregnant and have a willingness and desire to remain alcohol-free, it might be possible to complete your medication regime at home with the support of a Detox Nurse Specialist.

If you meet the criteria for a home completion of your detox, on the day of discharge you will receive a medication regime, a visit plan and a take home prescription. You will also be asked to read and sign a patient contract. All of these will be explained fully to you by the Detox Nurse. You must not deviate from the medication regime that has been prescribed for you.

The day of or the day following discharge from hospital, you will be visited by the Detox Nurse in your home. Your blood pressure and pulse will be checked and you will be breathalysed. You will also be

asked a series of questions to check whether the medication is working to control your withdrawals. During the visit, Abstinence Services will be discussed with you and you will be referred to your local community service, unless you are already accessing them. We will also discuss abstinence medications.

If you are not available for any of your planned visits, refuse any of the checks that you have agreed to or commence drinking alcohol again, your detoxification will be discontinued immediately as it is unsafe to drink alcohol with the medication we prescribe.

### **What medications will be used?**

**Chlordiazepoxide 5mg:** otherwise known as Librium. This is a sedative drug commonly used to relieve the symptoms of alcohol withdrawal.

The possible side effects of Chlordiazepoxide include drowsiness, dizziness and unsteadiness in movements, dry mouth, headache and confusion. You may or may not get any of these symptoms. You must not drive or operate machinery whilst taking this medication.

Side effects are rare but occasionally rashes, stomach upsets or headaches occur. You must not drink alcohol if you take this medication as there is a chance of causing serious breathing difficulties.

**Thiamine (Vitamin B):** is especially important when you have been drinking heavy and possibly not eating well, if at all. This is because alcohol destroys vitamin B, which is needed by the body for healthy nerve tissue. You may have experienced tingling or burning sensations in your fingers and toes. This is a warning that the nerve endings have experienced some damage. Once you have stopped drinking and started eating again, these symptoms should improve.

Thiamine is also used to form part of the structure of the blood vessels, including those to the brain. When you have been drinking

heavily your digestive system may not be able to absorb enough thiamine so we must replace it, to prevent any damage to the brain.

Side effects are rare, but may include itching, sweating, weakness, nausea and restlessness.

### **How You Can Help Yourself?**

**Sleep:** You may find that your sleep is disturbed. There is no need to worry about this; it will not seriously harm you. Your sleep pattern should return to normal within a month or so. Here are some suggestions to help you get back to normal sleep:

- Avoid tea, coffee or caffeinated drinks in an evening. These contain caffeine which is a stimulant and can prevent you from sleeping. Try warm milk or camomile tea.
- A warm bath to relax. A few drops of Lavender oil in the bath water aids relaxation.
- Ensure your room is an ambient temperature; not too hot or cold.
- Try not to over stimulate your mind before bed by playing computer games or watching an anxiety provoking television programme. You can try reading or listening to relaxing music.
- Reduce fluid intake in the evenings, so you are less likely to wake for the toilet.
- Try to go to bed at a reasonable time; not too early or late, and try to ensure you get up at a planned time each day even if you feel tired.
- Try not to have naps during the day.
- Being active during the day can promote sleep on an evening.
- Try counting your breaths in and out, up to 10 and back to zero.
- Remember, if you are wide awake, it is better to be up than in bed tossing and turning!

**Eat:** Try to eat small amounts regularly, even when you're not hungry. Maybe starting with light snacks; like soup or toast and

jam, then build up. It doesn't matter if you have breakfast cereal for your lunch, as long as you eat. Maybe ask someone to go shopping for you and buy some of your favourite food. Remember, breakfast is the most important meal of the day, to get your metabolism moving! Your appetite will return and as you get further into the detox programme and you should find it continues to improve.

Be aware that, if you're not eating well, your blood sugars could drop, and that alone can make you feel unwell and jittery. Also, in terms of energy levels, not consuming the food / energy, will make you feel less energised and less likely to want to do things and can be demotivating.

Quite often the body will crave the sugars / calories it is missing from the alcohol you have stopped. It can often help to suck on a sweet when the cravings occur.

**Drink Non-alcoholic Fluids:** Fluids are important to keep your body hydrated; you should aim for at least a litre each day. Try water, milk, juice and lemonade or any other non-alcoholic drink that you enjoy.

**Hygiene:** you may find during detoxification that you sweat excessively. Quite often, people will need to bathe or shower a couple of times a day to prevent any discomfort.

**Distraction:** It is important not to give in to the urge to drink alcohol. Distraction is one of the most effective tools you can use to help with this. Go for a walk, listen to music or take a bath to relax or exercise.

**Support:** There are also lots of support groups you can access which will look at relapse prevention, developing coping strategies, behavioural changes and harm reduction. Services are also available to assist you to access education, training, employment or volunteering.

**Abstinence Medications:** Your GP may be able to prescribe medication to help you abstain from alcohol. Your Detox Nurse can give you more information about these.

**If you require any further advice or support, please do not hesitate to contact the**

**Alcohol Liaison Service on 01706 517 102**

Please note that the Alcohol Liaison Service is available Monday to Friday between 9am – 5pm (excluding Bank Holidays)

**If English is not your first language and you need help, please contact the Interpretation and Translation Service**

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