Coping with Detox
stopping drinking
Coping with detox

This booklet gives information about:

• what to expect during an alcohol detox
• how to prepare
• possible withdrawal symptoms
• ways of coping
• medications for alcohol withdrawal
• the next steps after detox.

“This booklet is a general guide and we strongly recommend that you seek advice from your GP or FASS Alcohol Counsellor if you are planning to give up drinking”

Introduction

If you drink alcohol heavily over a prolonged period of time, your body can become dependent on it. Even if you want to stop drinking, it can be difficult because of the withdrawal symptoms that you can experience as a result of stopping. You may already have recognised this and are drinking steadily to make sure you’re always ‘topped up’.

Stopping drinking overnight can be risky, depending on your health and dependency on alcohol. If you think you might be dependent, or can relate to anything in the list at the bottom of this page, speak to your GP or FASS Alcohol Counsellor before attempting to stop drinking.

Planning a detox

The first stage of recovery is alcohol detoxification (or detox) - a process of cleansing the body in order to withdraw from alcohol. Willpower, accepting responsibility for your drinking, good planning and lots of the right kind of support can help you stick to your plan of giving up drinking.

A well planned detox will help you manage any unpleasant withdrawal symptoms so you can stop drinking as safely as possible with a minimum of discomfort. Please note that many of the withdrawal symptoms highlighted in this booklet only occur for a minority of people going through detox.

Specialist help for detox

Support during detox can range from family and friends, a FASS alcohol counsellor, your GP practice, NHS Addictions Nurse, or, for some people a period in hospital or residential clinic.

More intensive help will be needed if you have:

• any physical or mental health problems
• a history of prolonged and heavy drinking
• previous unsuccessful attempts to stop alcohol
• severe withdrawal symptoms when you have tried to come off alcohol
• an alcohol intake of more than 15 units per day. This is a half bottle of spirits, or 2 litres of strong cider or 7 pints of regular beer or a bottle and half of wine.
• an underlying medical condition, especially if you are taking regular medication
• a lack of home or social support.

Speak to your GP or FASS Alcohol Counsellor to find out what detox options are available in your area through the NHS and what is right for you.
Preparing for a detox at home

Many people prefer to go through detox at home. If your GP agrees with this decision then you are ready to start planning your detox.

Preparation is essential. Your GP or FASS Alcohol Counsellor or NHS Addictions Nurse can give you advice about how to prepare for detox and what support is available for you during this time.

It can be helpful to decide a specific date and time for your detox. In general, withdrawal from alcohol can last for about six days. It can be longer or shorter depending on your level of alcohol dependency.

The following are some suggestions when preparing for detox.

Your diet

It is highly recommended that you prepare yourself for the detox process by drinking lots of water, since it keeps the body free from toxins. A cupful of water every hour during the day is an ideal amount. Fresh fruit and vegetables also help in the alcohol detox process.

Complex carbohydrates like brown rice, wholemeal bread and wholegrain cereals will help to stabilize your blood sugar levels. These foods also contain B vitamins, which help recovery.

B-vitamin supplements can help, even be essential, as they help your nerve cells to recover from the damage that alcohol has caused to your body. The most important vitamin is Thiamine. Your pharmacist can advise on the best multi-vitamin to take.

Relaxation

Many people find controlled breathing techniques are a useful way of relaxing and reducing anxiety. Gentle, deep, rhythmic breathing helps the body to relax. The most basic method is simply to inhale through the nostrils whilst pushing the abdomen out. Hold as long as is comfortable before exhaling through the mouth. Take it easy and don’t force it.

Practice until abdominal breathing becomes the normal way to breathe rather than shallow breathing.

Over the counter medications

It is a good idea to stock up on other medications for symptoms like nausea, diarrhoea and headaches to help cope with the symptoms. Electrolyte replacement is important – the sachets you can get for diarrhoea are best and available over the counter. Speak to your pharmacist for more information.

Apart from this, discuss with your GP or NHS Addictions Nurse about the types of symptoms you may experience and prepare yourself for those. Your GP may also be able to recommend some over the counter or prescription medications to help with your detox.

Natural remedies

Some people find natural remedies helpful. For those who prefer this choice, some herbs and plants that may be beneficial in coping with detox are:

- mimosa tea - to help relieve headaches and anxiety and to also boost mood
- milk thistle - to help the liver recover from alcohol withdrawal
- kudzu – which is said to decrease the craving for alcohol.

As in all things use these remedies in moderation and if you’re not sure then consult someone who knows more about them.

Other preparations

You may have sudden temperature changes of hot or cold when withdrawing from alcohol so having blankets and light clothes to hand would help. It is also a good idea to get rid of any alcohol in the house, including unopened bottles.

Some experts even recommend getting rid of empty bottles and cans, or any reminders of alcohol, so that there are no reminders around you that may give you the temptation to drink.

Support

Lots of people find it helps to speak to their family or someone close to them about their decision to detox. Doing this would mean that you would have a support system and it would also stop anyone from bringing alcohol into your house or drinking it around you.

We strongly recommend having someone supportive to stay with you during your detox. It is important that you have somebody available to help should you experience any serious withdrawal symptoms.

It can also help to have someone to encourage you and remind you of the reasons why you are detoxing. Reinforcement and support can help you to keep going.

Contact numbers

It is essential to have contact numbers at hand if you need medical help. Ask your GP for the emergency number of your doctor’s surgery. Please also see our contact information at the end of this booklet.
What to expect during detox

The experience of detox varies from individual to individual. Physical symptoms can include:
- rapid heart rate;
- excess sweating;
- clammy skin;
- trembling/shaking;
- sickness;
- loss of appetite;
- diarrhoea;
- insomnia;
- severe stomach cramps and generally feeling unwell.

Psychological symptoms can include:
- anxiety or depression;
- rapid emotional changes;
- irritability and poor concentration.

There are lots of things that can help you to cope with your withdrawal symptoms.

Coping with withdrawal symptoms

Eating and drinking

During detox it is important to drink plenty of water or fruit juice to stay hydrated – this is absolutely essential. However avoid orange and other citric juices as they may irritate your stomach. Diarrhoea, vomiting and sweats may affect you, so returning fluids to the body is essential. A cupful of water an hour is about right.

Try not to drink too much tea coffee or cola as they contain caffeine, which can cause sleep problems and increase nervousness.

It is also important to fuel your body with food. Soup, fruit, toast, cereals and light meals are advisable. As soon as you feel better try to start having regular meals.

Shower/baths

Long, hot showers and baths can prove beneficial during this time period. Take as many of these as you wish, as long as you don’t become dehydrated, dizzy or confused.

Cravings

Cravings for alcohol often accompany the withdrawal symptoms, making it difficult to avoid a drink. It might help to be aware that alcohol detox only lasts for a short time. All of the aches and pains that go along with an alcohol detox will settle down as your body becomes accustomed to being without alcohol.

It can help to take some time to think about why you are doing the detox and write down your reasons for stopping drinking. This can be useful for getting through the difficult times and keep you focused on giving up drinking. Reward yourself for the progress that you make each day.

Exercise

Exercise can play an important role in detox. Depending on what your body can handle and what your GP or Addictions Nurse recommends, a bit of exercise each day can help your body get through the detox.

A safe light walk can provide a distraction from withdrawals and cravings as well as relieving any agitation if you are struggling to settle.

Sleep

Alcohol and alcohol withdrawal can interfere with sleep, so it is wise to be prepared for some sleepless nights and perhaps have some books or DVDs or other means of occupying yourself at hand. If you’ve been a regular heavy drinker, it may have been a long time since you’ve been in a healthy sleep pattern because, while alcohol can knock you out, it doesn’t give you a refreshing sleep.

Getting back into a good sleep routine can take a few weeks and there is no shortcut to this. While poor sleep is frustrating, it is not medically dangerous and you can be confident that your sleep will improve with time.

Ask for help when you need it - use your supports and contact numbers. Any detox from alcohol is more likely to succeed if you get the support that you need.

When to seek medical help

Medical help and guidance is essential if you have any mental or physical health problems. If you have a history of prolonged and heavy drinking then it is essential that you get support to reduce your alcohol intake.

If you have tried to come off alcohol before and had severe withdrawal symptoms (such as DT’s, seizures, hallucinations) then you will need assistance with coming off alcohol. It is dangerous to do so alone and essential that you have medical assistance at hand. Speak to your GP for further advice on the support available to you.

If you are worried about your symptoms, contact your GP surgery or, if your surgery is closed, call NHS 24. In an emergency e.g. seizures or collapse, someone supporting you needs to call an ambulance on 999.

Seizures

Seizures are a major concern during initial alcohol detox and involve a loss of consciousness and muscle spasms. They can cause memory impairment, drowsiness, confusion and headaches. Immediate medical help is essential.
Delirium Tremens (DTs)

The symptoms of DTs include marked tremor (the shakes), confusion, disorientation, hallucinations and agitation. It can affect your circulation, temperature control and cause your blood pressure to increase dramatically.

Seizures, heart attacks and strokes can also occur during the DTs, which can be fatal if not properly treated. Around 5% of people withdrawing from alcohol will experience DTs. Again, immediate medical help is essential.

Dehydration

Dehydration is a serious side effect of alcohol withdrawal and can be life threatening. Drink plenty of water during your detox and stay hydrated. Electrolyte replacement is also important (available from the chemist) especially if you have sickness and/or diarrhoea.

Hallucinations

The brain’s recovery after stopping drinking can lead to a temporary period where your senses are heightened. Lights might seem brighter, noises louder and smells stronger. The severe form of this is hallucinations i.e., seeing, hearing, smelling or hearing things that are not there.

If you think you are experiencing these, contact emergency medical services. Detox medications are effective with these symptoms if taken early enough and at the right dose.

Why support is important

With the possibility of serious withdrawal symptoms such as these, we strongly advise you to have support at home at all times during your detox, otherwise you may be at risk.

If you have experienced any of these symptoms in the past, it is essential that you speak to your GP or NHS Addictions Nurse, as a home detox may not be a suitable or safe way to come off alcohol.

Medications for alcohol withdrawal

If you are receiving medical assistance, then medicines may be prescribed during and after alcohol detox. This will depend on your individual circumstances and medical diagnosis. The medications below are often prescribed. If you have any concerns about medication, speak to your GP or NHS Addictions Nurse for further advice.

Chlordiazepoxide (also known as Librium)

Chlordiazepoxide has a calming and sedating effect, which can help to relieve some symptoms of alcohol withdrawal. It reduces anxiety and relaxes muscles. It also reduces the risks of seizures and hallucinations.

This medicine is only suitable for short-term use with the dose being reduced on a day-by-day basis. It is only used during period of alcohol withdrawal and rarely needs to be used for more than seven days.

Medications to prevent relapse

Disulfiram (also known as Antabuse)

Disulfiram helps people with chronic alcohol problems to stay off alcohol so that they can get the best out of their treatment and support. It makes the body sensitive to alcohol and causes an unpleasant reaction when alcohol is taken. Even a tiny amount of alcohol risks a severe reaction. Disulfiram is not suitable for everyone.

It is usually recommended that Disulfiram be prescribed after an alcohol detox is completed. If you are treated with Disulfiram, you should be fully informed of the medication before starting treatment. Involving a trusted family member or friend in your use of Disulfiram can help keep you on track and build trust. Disulfiram should only be used in conjunction with counselling or other therapeutic treatments.

Acamprosate (also known as Campral)

Acamprosate works by helping the brain recover from some of the effects of long-term alcohol use. This helps people cope better with situations where they used to drink and makes it easier for them to avoid relapse.

Acamprosate is best started soon after detox and should be continued even if there has been a brief drinking relapse as it can help the process of recovery. It works best if combined with counselling or other therapeutic treatments.
After your detox

The detox itself is an important first step but not the only one on your journey. People who receive counselling or other therapeutic support following detox are less likely to go back to drinking heavily.

Support from family and close friends can also be invaluable. It’s a good idea to be around people who are supportive of your recovery and avoid those who will pressure you to drink.

We recommend that you arrange one-to-one counselling and/or attend a group organised by Alcoholics Anonymous. Some people do both. Speak to us about the support available to you (see our contact details at the end of this booklet).

Counselling with FASS

Working with an alcohol counsellor on a regular basis can be an important part of recovery.

Counselling can help you prepare for detox. Counselling can help you address any underlying issues you may have – things that influenced your drinking. Counselling is confidential, non-judgemental and accepting of who you are. It asks only that you try to work towards change.

Counselling can help you with:

- detox preparation
- accessing detox services
- preventing relapse by supporting you after detox
- finding solutions to any underlying issues that led you to drink in the first place, whether these be personal, emotional, family, employment, or financial
- building relationships with family and friends
- finding healthy lifestyle choices to fill the void left by alcohol and to build for the future
- support if you are on a course of prescribed Disulfiram or Acamprosate.

Relapse prevention

A major aim of counselling is to help you minimise or prevent relapse. Following a successful detox you need to manage those personal and social ‘pressures’ that will encourage you to start drinking again. Counselling can help you prepare for this with a well thought out plan that includes methods of staying in control so you can cope with these situations.

FASS can also provide you with another booklet called ‘Relapse Prevention’, which gives help and practical advice about staying off alcohol. Get in touch with us today or see the Self Help Leaflets section of our website for a downloadable PDF version of the booklet.

A word of advice

If you have decided to stop drinking, we recommend in all cases that you speak to your GP, a FASS Alcohol Counsellor or NHS Addictions Nurse for advice. Going through a detox under medical supervision can alleviate and reduce the symptoms that you might encounter.

It is also important to be honest about the amount of alcohol that you drink, so that you receive the right support when coming off alcohol.

Contact Information

**Fife Alcohol Support Service (FASS)** provides free, confidential one-to-one alcohol counselling, psychotherapy and support for anyone aged 16+ who is concerned about their own drinking or that of another. Our service is available in health centres, hospitals and community settings throughout Fife, day and evening.

See back page for full details

**ADAPT** offers advice, support and access to the right kind of help including the NHS Addictions Service for anyone in Fife worried about their own or another’s substance use, including alcohol, recreational drugs such as cocaine or cannabis, ‘legal’ highs and prescribed medications.

See back page for full details

**NHS Fife Addiction Services** provides treatment options including detoxification for people with alcohol problems in the Fife area. Their services can be accessed through your GP, a FASS counsellor or by contacting the ADAPT service.

If you are concerned about any withdrawal symptoms that you are experiencing, contact your GP during surgery hours or NHS 24 on 08454 24 24 24 when your GP surgery is closed.

**Fife Alcohol & Drug Partnership** is a source of treatment and rehabilitation service contacts for the Fife area - 08451 55 55 55 + Ext 44 61 54

**Drinkline**, the national alcohol helpline, can offer you confidential information, support and advice 24 hours a day - 0800 917 8282.

**Alcoholics Anonymous** also operate a national helpline on 0845 769 7555 or contact by email: help@alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

**Samaritans** offer a 24 hour confidential emotional support service for anyone in distress, despair or suicidal - 08457 90 90 90.
We provide free, confidential one-to-one alcohol counselling, psychotherapy and support for anyone aged 16+ who is concerned about their own drinking or that of another. Our service is available in health centres, hospitals and community settings throughout Fife, day and evening.

Fife Alcohol Support Service
17 Tollbooth Street
Kirkcaldy,
Fife, KY1 1RW

Tel: 01592 206 200
Email: enquiries@fife-alcohol-support.org.uk
Website: www.fife-alcohol-support.org.uk

The ADAPT service offers advice and access to the right kind of help for anyone in Fife worried about their own or another’s substance use.

ADAPT Clinics can be found throughout Fife. Just drop-in to one and you will find an ADAPT Support Worker ready to listen carefully, assess your needs and help you find the right service. To find a clinic visit the ADAPT pages at:

www.fife-alcohol-support.org.uk
or call in confidence on

0800 111 4431 (mobile calls may be charged on this number)

or

01592 206200
01592 640919

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