

ALCOHOL SUPPORT & INFORMATION

Coping with detox stopping drinking



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, FASS Alcohol Counsellor or NHS Addiction Service Nurse if you are planning to reduce or 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 can be risky, depending on your health and level of dependency. If you think you might be dependent, or you can relate to anything listed in the Specialist help for detox section of this booklet, please speak to your GP, FASS Alcohol Counsellor or ADAPT 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. 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.

Good planning and the right kind of support will help you stick to your aim of giving up drinking.

Specialist help for detox

The support you need may include family and friends, your GP practice and NHS Addiction Service Nurses. Your detox may take place at home, often with medical support, and some people will require a period in a hospital or residential clinic.

More intensive support may 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 about a half of a 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.

To get a medically supported detox, speak to your GP, your FASS Alcohol Counsellor or contact ADAPT Substance Recovery on **01592 321321** to find out what detox options are available in your area through the NHS.

What to expect from 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. Diarrhoea, vomiting and sweats may affect you, so returning fluids to the body is essential. A cupful 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.

Showers/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 movies 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 DTs, seizures, hallucinations) then you will need assistance with coming off alcohol. It is dangerous to do so alone.

If you are worried about your symptoms, talk to your Addictions Nurse if you have one, or contact your GP surgery, or if your surgery is closed, call NHS 24 on 111. In an emergency e.g. seizures or collapse, someone supporting you needs to call an ambulance on 999.

Severe withdrawal symptoms to look out for are:

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 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, 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, as a home detox may not be a suitable or safe way to come off alcohol.

Medications for alcohol withdrawal

Some medications may be prescribed during and after alcohol detox. You may or may not be given medication for alcohol withdrawal depending on your individual circumstances. If you have any concerns about medication, speak to your Doctor for further advice.

Chlordiazepoxide (also known as Librium)

Librium is used for its sedating and anxiety-relieving effects, which help to relieve the symptoms of alcohol withdrawal. It has a calming effect and results in sleepiness, relaxed muscles and decreased anxiety. This medicine is only suitable for short-term use with the dose being reduced on day-by-day basis. Possible side effects of Librium are drowsiness, impaired concentration and alertness, light-headedness, confusion, shaky movements, unsteady walk, memory loss, unexpected increase in aggression or muscle weakness.

These side effects are usually a sign that the dose is too high. The side effects of this medication are made worse by drinking alcohol. Treatment with this medicine should be stopped gradually, following doctor's instructions. If the medicine is stopped suddenly, there may be withdrawal symptoms such as anxiety, insomnia, confusion, sweating, tremor, loss of appetite, irritability or convulsions.

Disulfiram (also known as Antabuse)

Antabuse is used to help people with chronic alcohol problems to stay off alcohol in order to get the best out of their treatment and support. Antabuse makes the body sensitive to alcohol and causes an unpleasant reaction in the body when alcohol is taken. Even a very small amount of alcohol risks a severe reaction when taking Antabuse. It is usually recommended that this medication should be taken after detoxification has been completed. People who are treated with Antabuse should be fully informed of the medication before starting treatment.

The symptoms that Antabuse produces when alcohol is taken can include: flushing, nausea, vomiting, sweating, thirst, throbbing in the head and neck, respiratory difficulty, chest pain, palpitations, hyperventilation, weakness,

vertigo, blurred vision and confusion. These symptoms can be very serious and require medical assessment.

Acamprosate (also known as Campral)

Campral 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 detoxification. The medication should be continued even if there has been a brief drinking relapse as it can help the process of recovery.

Side effects tend to be mild and do not last. They can include itching, skin rashes, abdominal pain, vomiting, nausea or diarrhoea. The dose is often reduced in people of low weight to reduce side effects.

After your detox

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

Support from family and close friends can be invaluable and give you a better chance of staying off the drink for good.

We also 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

Counselling is an opportunity to talk things through in an accepting and non-judgemental setting, at your own pace. Your counsellor is trained to understand how you view your problems and where alcohol fits in. 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 Antabuse or Campral.

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 'triggers' that will encourage you to start drinking again. Counselling can help 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 companion booklet called 'Relapse Prevention', which gives help and practical advice about staying off alcohol. Get in touch with us today or see the Downloads – Alcohol Support section of our website for a 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 for advice. Going through a detox under the supervision of your Doctor or the NHS Addiction Service 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

FASS ADAPT Substance Recovery

ADAPT is the main alcohol and drug triage service in Fife. It provides assessment of need and referral to specialist alcohol and drug services within the NHS and Third Sector. ADAPT helps people access the NHS Addiction Service for detox.

Just drop-in to one of our ADAPT Clinics that can be found throughout Fife and speak to a **Support Worker** or call our Helpline on **01592 321321**.

You can find a Clinic by calling the Helpline on **01592 321321** or by visiting the ADAPT pages at **www.fassaction.org.uk**

FASS Alcohol Support Service

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.

Call us on **01592 206200** or ask your GP or Addictions Nurse to arrange a referral. More information is available on **www.fassaction.org.uk**

NHS Fife Addiction Service

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 our ADAPT service.

Local Surgery or NHS 24

Talk to your Addictions Nurse if you are concerned about any withdrawal symptoms that you are experiencing during a detox organised by the Addiction Service, or contact your GP during surgery hours, or **NHS 24 on 111** when your GP surgery is closed.

Samaritans offer a 24 hour confidential emotional support service for anyone in distress, despair or suicidal. Call their helpline FREE on **116 123**.



Taking the next step

For support and further information available in Fife or Tayside please contact:

FASS Alcohol Support Service

Call us in confidence on

01592 206200

Access online help and support

www.fassaction.org.uk

[f @FASSFife](#) | [t @FASSFife](#)

Tayside Council on Alcohol

Call us in confidence on

01382 456012

Access online help and support

www.alcoholtayside.com

Other National information and support can be accessed through the following organisations:

Alcohol Focus Scotland

www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous

Helpline. 0800 9177 650 | www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

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