



Patient education: Alcohol use disorder – Discharge instructions (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What are discharge instructions?

Discharge instructions are information about how to take care of yourself after getting medical care for a health problem.

What is alcohol use disorder?

This is the medical term for alcohol addiction or what most people think of as alcoholism. Alcohol problems are common, but there are treatments that can help.

Some people lose control of their drinking. They drink more than they mean to. Others find that they need more and more alcohol to get the same effects. Some people notice symptoms if they drink less. This means that their brain and body are physically addicted to alcohol. They have a strong need or craving to drink alcohol. Some people cannot stop or limit their drinking once they start.

People can have trouble with alcohol when they drink too much, too fast, or too often. A person can be at risk for accidents and problems if they drink too much, even if they do not have alcohol use disorder.

Can I stop drinking on my own?

Many people are able to cut back on drinking on their own. But if you have been drinking several days a week for weeks in a row, do **not** try to drink less without the help of a doctor or

nurse. Stopping or reducing drinking too quickly can cause something called "alcohol withdrawal." This can cause symptoms and, in some cases, even lead to death.

How do I care for myself at home?

Ask the doctor what you need to do when you go home. Make sure that you understand exactly what you need to do to care for yourself. Ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

- You might need help to quit or limit drinking. Talk with your doctor or nurse about the best plan for you. You might:
 - See a counselor, such as a psychologist, social worker, or psychiatrist.
 - Go to a treatment center or special recovery center.
 - Take part in a recovery program while living at home.
 - Take part in a support group such as Alcoholics Anonymous ("AA").

All of these treatments can help, and they can be combined.

- There are many things you can do to manage your drinking and lower your risk for problems. Some examples:
 - Some people choose to stop drinking alcohol completely. But if you have been drinking several days a week for weeks in a row, do **not** try to reduce without the help of a doctor or nurse. Stopping drinking abruptly can lead to withdrawal.
 - Other people continue to drink with some limits. Talk with your doctor or nurse to find the best option for you. If you do drink:
 - Limit the amount you drink, or alternate your drinks with a glass of water or other non-alcoholic drink.
 - Do not drink on an empty stomach. Food helps your body absorb alcohol more slowly.
 - **Never** drive if you have been drinking.
- Talk to a friend or family member that you feel comfortable with and who can help you stay responsible and not drink.

- Keep a drink journal. Write down how much you drink, where you were, and anything that might have triggered your drinking. This can help you learn more about your drinking patterns and make changes.
 - Make some changes in your daily habits, and try a new routine:
 - Avoid places, people, and situations that bring up thoughts of drinking.
 - Spend time with people who are not drinking alcohol. It can help to be with people who support your recovery and give you comfort, encouragement, and guidance.
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What follow-up care do I need?

Your doctor or counselor might want to check on your progress. Go to these appointments. Be honest with them about your progress, how you are feeling, and any problems.

When should I call the doctor?

Alcohol poisoning is an emergency. **Call for an ambulance** (in the US and Canada, **call 9-1-1**) if someone:

- Stops breathing, or goes 10 seconds or more without breathing
- Breathes very slowly (fewer than 8 breaths in 1 minute)
- Turns blue or very pale, and their skin feels cool to the touch
- Has a seizure
- Passes out and cannot be woken up at all
- Cannot stop vomiting
- Looks very sick
- Is not able to stand, or falls over and over again
- Has a head injury, or a fall that could lead to a head injury

Delirium tremens ("DTs") is the most serious form of alcohol withdrawal. This is also an emergency. **Call for an ambulance** (in the US and Canada, **call 9-1-1**) if someone:

- Has hallucinations – This is when a person sees, hears, feels, smells, or tastes things that aren't there.
- Is confused about where they are or who they are
- Feels very upset and anxious

- Has shaking that cannot be controlled
- Has a fast heartbeat
- Has a fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher
- Is sweating a lot

Call your doctor for advice if you have milder symptoms of alcohol withdrawal. These might include:

- Trouble sleeping
- Headache
- Nausea

You should also call your doctor if you are having trouble drinking less, or if you have any other symptoms that worry you.

More on this topic

[Patient education: Alcohol use — when is drinking a problem? \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Alcohol poisoning \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Alcohol withdrawal \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Alcohol and drug use in pregnancy \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Fetal alcohol syndrome \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Cirrhosis \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Substance use disorder \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Alcohol use — when is drinking a problem? \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Risks and benefits of alcohol \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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