



Patient education: Alcohol withdrawal (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is alcohol withdrawal?

Alcohol withdrawal is a condition that happens when a person who often drinks large amounts of alcohol suddenly stops drinking. People with alcohol withdrawal often have a headache, a stomach ache, and trouble sleeping. But sometimes, the symptoms are much more serious and even life-threatening.

What are the symptoms of alcohol withdrawal?

Mild symptoms include:

- Trouble sleeping
- Trembling
- Feeling anxious
- Having an upset stomach and not wanting to eat
- Headache
- Sweating
- Feeling like your heart is beating fast, beating hard, or skipping a beat – These heartbeat changes are called "palpitations."

These symptoms often start within 6 hours after a person stops drinking. They might go away within 1 or 2 days. But some people also get more serious symptoms, including:

- Seizures – These are waves of abnormal electrical activity in the brain. They can make a person pass out, or move or behave strangely. With alcohol withdrawal, seizures usually happen within 12 to 48 hours after the person stops drinking.

- Hallucinations – Hallucinations are when you hear, see, feel, smell, or taste things that aren't there. During alcohol withdrawal, the most common type is seeing things that aren't there. This symptom tends to happen within 12 to 24 hours after the person stops drinking and stops within 1 or 2 days.
- Delirium tremens, or "DT" – This is the most serious form of alcohol withdrawal. Symptoms include:
 - Hallucinations
 - Feeling confused about where you are or who you are
 - Feeling very upset and anxious
 - Uncontrolled shaking
 - Fast heartbeat
 - High blood pressure
 - Fever
 - Sweating

The symptoms start 2 to 4 days after a person stops drinking. They can last up to 5 days.

Should I see a doctor or nurse?

Yes. See your doctor or nurse right away, even if you have mild symptoms of alcohol withdrawal. The symptoms can get more serious, and possibly even lead to death, if you are not treated.

Is there a test for alcohol withdrawal?

Your doctor or nurse should be able to tell if you have it by learning about your symptoms and doing an exam. But they might do tests to check for other problems.

Tests might include:

- Blood tests
- Urine tests
- A CT scan of your head – A CT scan is an imaging test that creates pictures of the brain.
- A lumbar puncture (sometimes called a "spinal tap") – During this procedure, your doctor puts a thin needle into your lower back and takes out a small amount of spinal fluid. Spinal

fluid surrounds the brain and spinal cord. Your doctor will send the spinal fluid to a lab for tests.

How is alcohol withdrawal treated?

Treatment depends on your symptoms. If you have mild symptoms, your doctor might prescribe medicines to take at home. But to do this, you need to meet these conditions:

- Have a reliable relative or friend who can stay with you for 3 to 5 days to make sure your symptoms are not getting worse
- Be able to go in for a medical visit every day
- Not be pregnant or have any physical or mental health problems
- Not have other substance use problems
- Have never had serious alcohol withdrawal symptoms in the past

If you do not meet these conditions or if you have serious symptoms, you will be treated in the hospital. You might get medicines through a thin tube that goes into your vein, called an "IV." All people treated for alcohol withdrawal should also take multivitamins (as pills or through an IV).

Your doctor or nurse will also refer you to a program to treat people with alcohol problems. In these programs, people can:

- See a counselor (such as a psychologist, social worker, or psychiatrist)
- Take medicines
- Take part in a social support group like AA (Alcoholics Anonymous)

All of these treatments can help, and you can do more than 1 at the same time.

More on this topic

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

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

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