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In May we're holding online testing sessions and we're are offering a £50 amazon voucher to thank you for your time.

Find out more

Alcohol withdrawal

Alcohol withdrawal symptoms can be extremely dangerous. Find out what they are and what you should do if you are experiencing them.





Heavy drinkers who suddenly decrease or stop drinking altogether may experience withdrawal symptoms. They are potentially dangerous and should be treated as a serious warning sign that you are drinking too much.

Withdrawal symptoms are part of a condition called 'alcohol withdrawal syndrome', which is a reaction caused when someone who has become dependent on alcohol is deprived of it.

The more you drink on a regular basis, the more you're likely to be affected by withdrawal symptoms. To keep health risks from alcohol to a low level, the UK Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) advise it is safest not to drink more than 14 units a week Hello! We are here to help.



If you are concerned you might be dependent on alcohol, you should seek medical advice to help you cut down and stop your drinking safely.



What are alcohol withdrawal symptoms?

Withdrawal symptoms can be physical and psychological, and range in severity from mild to severe.

Typical symptoms of alcohol withdrawal can include: 1,2

Hand tremors ('the shakes')

Sweating

A pulse rate above 100 beats per minute

Nausea

Vomiting

Headaches

Loss of appetite

Depression

Anxiety

Irritability

Milder symptoms usually start within eight to 24 hours from the last alcoholic drink.³

Severe symptoms can additionally include hallucinations (seeing, hearing, or feeling things that aren't real),⁴ as well as seizures or delirium tremens ('DTs').

Delirium tremens is a severe indication of alcohol withdrawal. Symptoms include: 5,6

Severe disorientation

Restlessness

Insomnia (difficulty sleeping)

Increased heart rate, blood pressure and breathing problems

Uncontrollable restless behaviour

Severe withdrawal effects can be life threatening.

Approximately one in 10 people with alcohol withdrawal syndrome are affected by seizures.⁷ If left untreated, up to one in three of these patients go on to experience delirium

tremens.

If you (or someone you're looking after) experience repeated vomiting, severe shaking or hallucinations, seek medical attention.

Alcohol support services

What happens if I don't reduce my drinking?

Alert

If you continue to regularly drink heavily despite experiencing withdrawal, you may find your symptoms get more and more severe.⁸ You must take action to reduce the amount you drink if you're experiencing withdrawal symptoms, to prevent them getting worse.

How withdrawal relates to alcohol dependency

If you experience withdrawal symptoms, it's one sign that you're becoming dependent on alcohol. And if you're experiencing these symptoms several days a week, it's very likely you are already dependent on alcohol.

Our alcohol self-assessment can help you identify if the amount you drink could be putting your health at serious risk. We use a tool developed by the World Health Organisation (WHO), called 'AUDIT', that is used internationally by medical professionals to check for harm that can be caused by alcohol use disorders, including dependence.

Take the Drinking Check

Alcohol dependence, also known as 'alcoholism' or alcohol addiction, is serious and can lead to a range of health problems. People who are dependent on alcohol may experience a strong, often uncontrollable, desire to drink and feel they're unable to function without alcohol.

Did you know?

Medically, alcohol dependence is recognised as a type of 'alcohol-use disorder' which can be treated. It's different to 'harmful drinking' (another type of alcohol-use disorder) which is a pattern of heavy drinking which causes damage to your health, but without actual dependence.

If you think you're dependent, you must seek medical help and talk to a health professional at your GP surgery about how to reduce your drinking.

Find out more about alcohol dependence here.

Relieving symptoms of alcohol withdrawal

If you get withdrawal symptoms, you will need medical support to help you reduce and stop your drinking. That will help you decide on the best plan to stop drinking, with support which can include specific prescription medication to take during your withdrawal. This sort of medication can be essential for people with severe alcohol dependence, to avoid the danger of having a seizure during withdrawal, which could result in permanent injury or death.

Fact

Although severe withdrawal symptoms can take up to a year to fully recover from, most people feel better within a week of stopping drinking. The first 48 hours are likely to be the worst.

To relieve your symptoms once you've stopped drinking:

Keep yourself hydrated with plenty of non-alcoholic drinks (but avoid caffeine)

Try to eat regularly

Find ways to relax, like reading, going for a walk, or listening to music

Seek support and company from non-dependent friends and family

If you have been prescribed medication, take it as directed

For some people, insomnia caused by stopping drinking can be challenging. It's really important to resist any urge to start drinking again 'to help get off to sleep'.

In fact, stopping drinking is a great way to improve the quality of your sleep. If you experience insomnia, it's worth remembering that your sleep patterns will almost certainly start to return to normal as your brain recovers from withdrawal.

Find out more about treatment for alcohol dependence

What causes alcohol withdrawal symptoms?

Withdrawal symptoms are caused by the way your brain reacts when you drink heavily.9

Alcohol affects the area of the brain responsible for the 'fight or flight' function which helps our brains respond to danger, by preparing us to either react or run away. Because alcohol is a depressant, drinking suppresses the 'fight or flight' response in your brain and nervous system.

Over time, if you regularly drink heavily, the central nervous system gets used to the supressing effect of the alcohol, which means your brain is affected if the alcohol level suddenly drops. You can go straight into' fight or flight' mode as the alcohol leaves your system, even when there's no danger present.

All withdrawal symptoms - whether the psychological ones like anxiety, or the physical ones like the shakes - are caused by your body going into 'fight or flight' mode.

Alcohol support services

If you're worried about your drinking, get in touch with your local GP surgery, who will be able to help.

You can also search for alcohol support services in your area using the below links:

England

Northern Ireland

Scotland

Wales

If you're simply looking to speak to someone on the phone or chat online for more advice on your own or someone else's drinking, get in touch with Drinkchat or Drinkline.

Drinkchat is a free online chat service with trained advisors offering confidential advice. The service is available from 9am-2pm on weekdays.

Chat with an advisor

Drinkline is a free, confidential helpline available from 9am – 8pm on weekdays, and 11am – 4pm at the weekend. Call 0300 123 1110.

Call Drinkline

Alcoholics Anonymous

If you need help with a drinking problem you can phone the national Alcoholics Anonymous helpline on 0800 917 7650 or email help@alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk. You can also find out more information on their website.

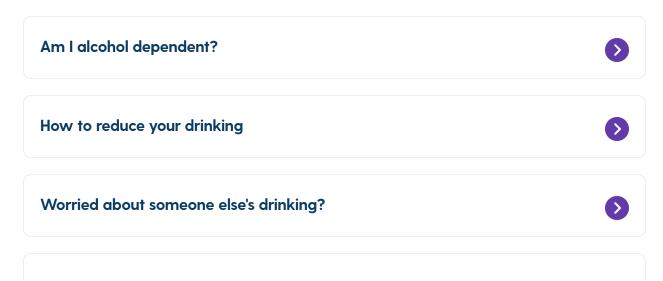
We Are With You (formerly Addaction)

For help and advice visit the <u>We Are With You website</u>. To find your nearest service in England or Scotland, visit the Service Finder section of the website.

More useful links and phone numbers for support services

Further advice and information

Arming yourself with strategies and tips can help you or a loved one take small steps towards big results.



How to stop drinking alcohol completely



Was this information helpful?

References

Last Reviewed: 6th January 2022

Next Review due: 6th January 2025

Newsletter

Tips to change your relationship with alcohol

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