

## **Advice for heavy drinkers, on cutting back or stopping alcohol use**

### **Is this advice for me?**

This advice is for you, if you are at risk of withdrawal symptoms if you stop, or cut down, on your alcohol consumption (detox).

This advice is to help you, and your families and friends, self-manage your alcohol withdrawal, as safely as possible.

### **When is the right time to cut down or stop alcohol?**

The decision about whether the time is right to make any changes to your drinking is up to you. You may decide to keep going as you have been, to cut back, or to stop completely. In general, cutting down and staying at lower levels of alcohol may be harder than stopping altogether, but the process for doing so, is much the same for both.

### **What withdrawal symptoms may I notice?**

The most common symptoms of withdrawal are sweating, shaking, feeling sick and anxious. These can typically last around a week. You may not experience all of them. Occasionally, more serious symptoms can occur, which need medical help, but approaching detox in an organised way can help reduce your risks and is beneficial for your health in the long-term.

### **What are the more serious symptoms of withdrawal to look out for?**

In more severe cases, alcohol withdrawal can cause:

- Seizures (fits) even if you have not had one before
- Hallucinations (seeing, hearing or feeling things that aren't there)
- Confusion (about where you are, what time it is, who you are with)
- Poor coordination and unsteadiness on your feet

If you experience any of these, please call for urgent medical attention (phone 111).

### **Am I at risk of having withdrawal symptoms?**

- Do you drink over 15 units of alcohol every day?  
(This could be approximately: ½ bottle of spirits, 1½ bottles of wine, 6 pints regular strength beer, 3 cans super lager, 2 litres of strong cider)
- Have you had withdrawal symptoms in the past when cutting back or stopping alcohol?  
(symptoms can sometimes take a few days to start)
- Do you drink alcohol soon after you wake up to relieve shakes or sweats?

**If you answered yes to any or all of these questions, it is likely you will need to do some planning if want to stop or cut down on your drinking.**

**It is not advisable to stop drinking abruptly. Alcohol intake at this level should be gradually reduced, to decrease the risk of serious harm.**

## **STEP 1:           ASSESSING YOUR ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION**

The first step is to work out your typical daily intake. You may know this already, or easily be able to work it out from your buying routine.

If you are unsure, keeping a diary of your drinking for around 3 days should help. Be honest!

If you drink a combination of drinks, for instance, beer through the day and wine at night, use a drink calculator to work out your overall typical daily intake in units. There is a calculator at this link:

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-support/calculating-alcohol-units/>

If you are going to detox, it is usually easier to use only one type of drink, so try to decide which drink will be the easiest for you to reduce and stop.

If you can, tell a trusted friend or family member what your typical daily intake is. Even if you are not planning to make any changes to your drinking now, this may be important information for people involved in your care in the future.

## **STEP 2:           MAKING A PLAN FOR ALCOHOL DETOX OR REDUCTION**

Once you have worked out your typical intake, stick at that level for around 3 days, and monitor how you feel, looking out for shakes and sweating. If at this level, you are already experiencing symptoms, it may be that you have underestimated how much you were drinking. Keep a note of what times of day are most difficult for you.

If you have decided to quit, set a day to start your detox. If you can, tell a trusted person/people that you are doing this and keep in contact with them. Ensure you have food and other necessities with you. If you are in touch with an Alcohol Worker, let them know your plans, so they can provide you with more support and advice if possible.

The important thing is to reduce your intake each day, at a pace that is manageable for you. Better to make a bit of progress each day, than to go too fast and risk making yourself unwell.

Keep a note of your daily intake while reducing. Use the same size glass to help you keep track. Use a measuring cup if you have one. Be honest with yourself and other people.

Many people find the drinks in the middle of the day are easier to cut back on to start with, so they keep their early and late “doses” stable at the start of the detox. If you are a spirit drinker, gradually reducing the alcohol and increasing the mixer can help, but make sure to measure the amount of alcohol you are drinking.

### **STEP 3:           REDUCING AND STOPPING YOUR DRINKING**

You will set your own pace, but eight days is typical for an alcohol detox. However, this can vary from person to person – you may find you require a couple of days more or less, to cut down.

As an example, by Day 2 you might be at  $\frac{3}{4}$  of your previous intake, for instance, 6 cans instead of 8. By day 4, you might be at half your intake, for instance,  $\frac{1}{2}$  bottle of spirits instead of a bottle.

Withdrawals will often peak on Day 2 or 3, so make sure to use extra support on these days. If you have an alcohol worker, try to arrange to speak to them at least once each day for the first 3 days.

In general, after about 5 days, your symptoms should lessen and you can continue your gradual reduction of alcohol and stop around day 8. If, by day 5 things seem to be getting worse rather than better, contact your local community alcohol/addiction service for advice, or call 111.

Again, detoxes can vary from person to person, and you may find you require a couple of days more or less, to reduce your drinking.

If you develop more severe withdrawals (confusion, hallucinations or seizures), seek urgent medical advice. If someone is supporting you, make sure they also know to seek help if this happens.

### **STEP 4:           MAKING OTHER PLANS**

Try to make sure you have a safe place to stay when you are planning to detox. You may be able to arrange for friends or family to visit. Keep in touch with them by telephone or online. Tell your trusted friends about your progress with alcohol, but talk about other things too.

It is very important that you have a good nutritional intake during a detox. Keep up your fluids intake. Water is better than coffee or soft drinks. Avoid “energy drinks”. Your vitamin and mineral intakes are important, in particular, a vitamin called Thiamine. You get this in bread, rice, fish and meat. If you have Thiamine tablets or multivitamins, take these as prescribed/directed. If you are vomiting and unable to keep food down, try nutritious liquids such as soup. If this doesn’t work, seek advice from 111.

One thing that may take time to improve is your sleep. Sleep depends on routine and improves with practice. So be patient, and stick to a good sleep routine.

If you feel well enough, have other activities and distractions in place. You may want to discuss ideas for this with an alcohol worker or friend.