

## Alcohol Detoxification and Withdrawal (a guide for in patients)

### Aneurin Bevan Specialist Drug and Alcohol Service

If you drink alcohol on a daily basis, you may have noticed that going without it can make you feel unwell. This is called alcohol withdrawal and this leaflet aims to give you some information about what this is and how it can be treated (i.e., alcohol detoxification).

#### Our Favourite Chemical

Alcohol has effects on the brain where it acts as a depressant i.e. it slows down the nerve cells. This is why we talk about alcohol slowing reaction times and making people drowsy.



**If you drink on a regular basis, the brain does not like being permanently slowed down, so it makes changes to try to balance the effect of the alcohol.**

The brain does this by making more chemicals that activate it.

In someone drinking regularly, this increase in activating chemicals helps to balance out the slowing down effect of the alcohol so they can appear to function quite well.



#### Wot? No Alcohol?

So what happens when a regular drinker stops drinking alcohol? Well now you have removed the slowing down side of the seesaw, which leaves you with an excess of activating chemicals and these activating chemicals produce the symptoms of withdrawal.

Withdrawal symptoms typically start 6-8 hours after the last drink, peak within 24 hours and subside by 5 days. The risk of fits is reduced after the first 48 hours.

Shakes	Sweats	Feelings of panic
Nausea	Confusion	Hallucinations
Fits	Potentially death	

We know that, the more times you go through alcohol withdrawal, the more serious your symptoms get each time. So, if you were sick and confused the last time you withdrew, you are running the risk of fits next time.

The seriousness of the symptoms is one reason doctors never recommend a dependent drinker to stop suddenly.

## What can be Done?

Although it is not always safe to suddenly stop drinking, there are ways in which people can withdraw from alcohol. There are 2 main types:

1. Gradual reduction of the amount drunk with support through counselling.
2. Medically assisted detoxification i.e. replacing alcohol with medication and withdrawing this in a controlled way.

We will now consider the second option in detail.

## Medically Assisted Detox

The basic principle behind detox is that the alcohol is replaced with a medication (usually diazepam or chlordiazepoxide) which can then be withdrawn more easily. This can be done in one of two ways:

1. Symptom Triggered Detox - where specially trained staff monitor symptoms with an assessment scale to guide the use of medication.
2. Fixed Reduction Detox - where regular doses of medication are reduced over a period of 5-7 days.

Whichever process applies to you, your doctor will explain in more detail when they ask for your consent. *There is no regular prescription of diazepam given once the process is over.*

## Those Vitamin Injections

One important part of the detox process is the use of thiamine injections. Thiamine is vitamin B1 and found in the diet in wholegrain and some vegetables. It is important because it ensures our nerve cells, including the ones the brain, work properly. Dependent drinkers often have low body stores of thiamine and then, ironically, during withdrawal, the body demands more.



Without enough thiamine something called Wernicke's Encephalopathy can develop (WE - a form of Alcohol Related Brain Damage) occurring during withdrawal. To guard against this, thiamine replacement needs to be given and, because alcohol impairs absorption of thiamine tablets, it is given by injection either into the muscles or in an intravenous drip.

The injections into the muscle can sting. It is given daily for 5 days into the gluteal (bottom) muscle. There is a small risk of a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) with the injection - 1 in 5 million for the intramuscular injection and 1 in 250,000 for the intravenous form.

(Research shows that up to 20% of chronic drinkers can develop WE and in up to 17% of cases it can be fatal. Of the survivors, up to 85% can develop a longer lasting form of brain damage.)

## Side Effects of Treatment

Detox, however it is done, aims to match treatment levels to symptoms of withdrawal. Too little medication and you will experience some degree of withdrawal symptoms; too much and you may be unsteady on your feet and drowsy.

Both diazepam and chlordiazepoxide have similar side effects. These are:

- Drowsiness
- Light-headedness
- Confusion
- Ataxia (abnormal gait)
- Amnesia
- Increased aggression
- Muscle weakness

If you think you are experiencing troublesome side effects please speak to a member of staff.

One issue that people can be concerned about with these medicines is becoming dependent which is why you will only be prescribed them for the duration of the detox and will not be given a supply to take home.

## **Risks of Not Completing Detox**

If you decide not to continue with the detox yet still stay off alcohol you risk developing withdrawal symptoms. As we saw earlier, some of these can be quite dangerous. This is why, if you do decide to leave before the detox is complete, you will be advised to continue drinking.

This may seem strange but, if you are not withdrawing as part of a managed programme, the safest thing to prevent complications is often to drink. Whether you leave early or at the correct time, we recommend you reconnect with your local treatment service for further follow up.

**“This document is available in Welsh /  
Mae’r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg”.**