

Alcohol detox

What people can do to cut down their consumption?

Keep a regular drinking diary

Make a balance sheet stating pros and cons of

- Continuing with the current drinking pattern
- Reducing intake
- Stopping

What does a detox involve?

- First step is medical treatment to ease the withdrawal symptoms. It also aims to stop any medical complications that sometimes occur in people who have been drinking heavily. Next step is to help maintain abstinence with the help of talking therapies and self help groups.
- It can be offered on an inpatient or outpatient basis.
- A physical examination and routine blood tests are carried out to rule out any medical problems.
- 40-50% of people coming off alcohol will develop withdrawal symptoms if they abruptly stop drinking. Withdrawal symptoms start 6-8 hours after cessation of drinking and include anxiety, tremor, sweating, nausea, retching.
- Commonly used medicine is Chlordiazepoxide. It belongs to a group of anti anxiety drugs, called Benzodiazepines, which are also used as calming tablets and can cause sedation. Chlordiazepoxide is given in a daily reducing dose to avoid undue sedation, which is quite likely in people with liver problems.
- During detox. fits are a potential risk. Medical and nursing staff will monitor patient and in case of a fit Diazepam suppository will be given, from the back passage so that it is absorbed quickly and can terminate the fit.
- People who have been drinking excessively tend to have low levels of vitamins and can also have other nutritional deficiencies. Vitamin injections or tablets are given to prevent memory impairment. People are encouraged to drink plenty of fluids and to take things easy for a few days.
- Other medications used: Disulfiram and Acamprosate (alcohol sensitising agent)

Effects of alcohol on physical health

- Alcohol is a toxin to brain cells. When used in excess and over a long period of time it can cause death of brain cells and cause memory problems and dementia. In Korsakoff's syndrome people can't lay down new memory so they find it hard to learn new things.
- Alcohol also affects nerves outside brain, in legs and arms, leading to loss of sensation. This is known as peripheral neuropathy.
- Alcohol is flushed out of the body by liver so it has to work harder if alcohol consumption is high. This can lead to liver failure, which can cause yellow discolouration of the skin because of increase in bilirubin, a chemical normally flushed out of the body. Liver becomes inflamed and if alcohol consumption continues it shrinks with permanent loss of liver cells.
- Alcohol irritates stomach and the food pipe and can cause people to throw up blood.
- It also affects sexual functions leading to erectile problems and loss of desire.

- It can cause dilatation of the heart muscles thereby affecting its function. High blood pressure is another common problem.
- Drinking during pregnancy can interfere with normal development of the baby and cause malformation of the face and heart along with other problems.

Foetal alcohol syndrome occurs in 6% of the offspring of alcoholic mothers. Prenatal exposure to 3 drinks/day triples the risk of subnormal IQ at the age of 4 years. The rate of facial abnormalities also correlates with the amount of alcohol consumed in the first three months of pregnancy.

(Streissguth AP et al. IQ at age 4 in relation to maternal alcohol use and smoking during pregnancy. *Develop Psychol* 1989; 25: 3-11)

(Ernhart CB et al. Alcohol teratogenicity in the humans: A detailed assessment of specificity, critical period and threshold. *Am J Obstet Gynecol* 1987; 156: 33-39)