

A young person's guide to getting through a 'detox'

This information has been written for young people (under 25) who are trying to stop alcohol or drugs, either alone or with the help of family and/or friends. Most of the things described here are simple supportive strategies and don't involve prescribed medication or specialist input.

Why do you need to 'detox'?

If you take a substance regularly for a long period of time, you adjust to it both physically and psychologically. The drug (or alcohol) *changes* the way your body and brain works. These changes manifest as a 'habit' or *addiction* that gets harder to overcome. Eventually you need to take the substance (or more of it) just to feel okay or normal.

And once addicted, if you suddenly stop taking the substance you may go through '*withdrawal*'. Withdrawal or 'detox' is usually an unpleasant (and sometimes risky) *re-adjustment* process the brain and body goes through while getting used to not having the addictive substance in the system.

Examples of a 'detox'

Roimata's weed use has been increasing since her brother (a heavy smoker) moved back home. Now she's using at least a gram a day, every day. She has NCEA exams coming up and decides to stop. Two days later she feels anxious, irritable, can't sleep and is hanging out for a cone really badly.

Steve's girlfriend tells him that unless he takes a break from drinking, she will dump him. He agrees that things have been getting out of hand and he needs a break. He doesn't drink that Friday night and clears his diary for the weekend so he can stay home. By Sunday he is trembling, nauseous and highly anxious.

Stopping using alcohol and drugs safely

Most young people will be able to safely stop using substances with support from family and friends. Usually, the biggest barrier to a successful 'detox' is finding a safe place away from drugs and alcohol. Withdrawal from *cannabis*, *amphetamine* and *opiates* is unpleasant and difficult but seldom a significant health risk. Withdrawal from *alcohol* and other sedatives like *benzodiazepines* or *GHB* can be more risky (*seizures* can occur), especially for people who have been using heavily and for over 3 months.

Those at higher risk of problems during 'detox' include:

- Those with daily and long-term (greater than 12 weeks) use of *alcohol* or *other sedatives* like benzodiazepines or GHB.
- Those with an opiate addiction.
- Those who have a medical or psychiatric condition including a history of epilepsy or fits, diabetes, schizophrenia or bipolar affective disorder.
- Those who are hapu or pregnant.

In these cases, young people should seek help from a health professional such as your GP, school nurse or an alcohol and drug service. Rarely, people may suffer a seizure or epileptic fit while in withdrawal. If this occurs put the person in the *recovery position* and call an ambulance as soon as possible.

Withdrawal symptoms

Young people who stop using substances may have an unpleasant *withdrawal syndrome*, which can last 7 – 10 days (although this can differ depending on the substance). Symptoms of withdrawal are usually at their worst 2 – 4 days after stopping a substance and gradually decrease from then on.

Common symptoms of withdrawal from alcohol and or drugs include:

Psychological symptoms such as...

- Agitation, irritability, restlessness
- Moodiness, mood swings or feeling low in mood
- Anxiety, worries, inability to sleep
- Difficulty concentrating, fidgetiness, tiredness and feeling low in energy
- Craving (hanging out) or strong urges to use

Physical symptoms such as...

- Sweating, goosebumps, feeling hot or cold
- Cold or flu symptoms like runny nose and sneezing
- Loss of appetite, feeling sick in the stomach, vomiting, stomach cramps
- Aches and pains
- Feeling shaky and shivery
- Headache, insomnia, increased heart rate

Cravings

Cravings are intense thoughts and feelings that make you want to use again. They can be very difficult to resist. Cravings will *pass*. Work out a plan to get yourself through the most intense times.

- Remove '*cues*' or reminders of drugs or alcohol as these intensify craving.
- Remind yourself cravings get easier to deal with the longer you go without using.
- Keep *busy* - distract yourself by watching a movie, exercising, cooking, eating, cleaning, listening to music, playing games, walking or talking to family or friends.
- When craving, your thoughts can end up focusing on whether you should use again or not. Even thinking about using will intensify craving (it is a cue of sorts), so put the argument off for an hour.
- Focus on what is happening at that moment and take each hour as it comes. Thinking too far ahead can be overwhelming and unhelpful.
- Reward yourself each time you get through a period of craving. It is a definite achievement, as overcoming addiction is difficult.

Three D's

Remember the *3 D's* for coping with cravings

1. *Delay* - cravings will pass, so put off using for 5 to 10 minutes
2. *Distract* - have things to keep you busy to get through a craving
3. *Decide* - remind yourself of your goals and why you're cutting down

A calm and supportive environment is key...

- The place and people around you can be the most important thing (and hardest to find). It's really helpful if you, and the people supporting you, understand what may occur and ways to cope.
- Make sure the place where you detox is free from substances and will not be visited by people who have or use substances.
- Try to have plenty of fluid and healthy food available. If possible have a separate quiet room to go too when needed.
- Remove 'cues' or reminders about using substances, for example pictures of alcohol. Cues make it harder for people to resist cravings.
- Have activities available to help relieve boredom and distract you (i.e. netflix, books, games)
- Although some people may want to 'detox' alone, in general the chances of getting through withdrawal are increased with people supporting you, i.e. a concerned non-using carer/family member or friend who is on hand if required.
- A holiday or time away from your usual environment and social network is likely to be a good way to detox.
- Ensure carers/family know how to access medical support if required, especially after hours.

If you have disturbed sleep try these things...

- Reduce coffee, tea, cola and energy drinks during the day and have none after 2 pm.
- Eat 3 meals a day and avoid heavy, spicy meals late at night.
- Avoid napping during the day and keep to regular bed and wake times.
- Exercise regularly (in the day, not after 6 pm).
- Use relaxation techniques, have a bath in the evening.
- Avoid doing things that might upset you before going to sleep (i.e. tough phone calls).
- Some people find melatonin helps with re-setting their sleep-wake cycle.
- Taking sleeping pills (such as zopiclone) should be considered very carefully as these medications (benzodiazepines) are addictive in themselves. They should not be prescribed for more than 5 days, if at all.

For sweating/ hot and cold flushes, muscle aches...

- Massage and/or a heat rub/wheat bag.
- Have regular showers or baths.
- Do gentle exercise e.g. walking.
- Paracetamol – take as directed on the packet.
- Ibuprofen – take as directed on the packet.

If you feel sick or have poor appetite:

- Drink plenty of water, eat small simple meals and snack often.
- Try a nutritional supplement drink e.g. Up 'n' Go or Fortisip.

- If vomiting, stop eating solid food, try small sips of liquid or suck an ice cube and use rehydration/sports/isotonic drinks such as 'Powerade'.
- If vomiting persists, please see a GP as an anti-vomiting medication such as ondansetron may be required.
- Multivitamins may be helpful if you have not been eating well for some weeks.

If you get constipation or diarrhoea...

- Drink plenty of fluids - 6 - 8 glasses of water a day.
- Eat regular meals and try a high fibre diet.
- For constipation eat fresh fruit, prunes or kiwifruit.
- For severe diarrhoea try loperamide (Imodium) – take as directed on the packet.

If you're feeling really anxious or restless...

- Use relaxation exercises - deep breathing, muscle relaxation and relaxation music.
- Reduce caffeine intake.
- Have a bath.
- Do some gentle exercise – yoga, tai chi or walking.

The Three P's

Remember the **3 P's** for getting through a detox

1. **People** - ask positive and understanding people to help and support you.
2. **Prepare** - get ready in advance. Get set up with healthy comforts and distractions.
3. **Peace** - be kind to yourself. Get good at chilling out by practicing being peaceful.

What happens after withdrawal?

If you successfully get through withdrawal, remaining off drugs and alcohol can be an even bigger challenge.

- In most cases support from an **outpatient alcohol and drug service** will be the best way to cement change and prevent relapse into substance use.
- Attending adolescent-orientated **AA meetings** can be very useful for some young people.
- Everyone who has a detox is at risk of relapse. Going back to using substances is very common and shouldn't be seen as failure, nor a reason to stop seeking treatment or trying again.
- Remember that even short periods of sobriety are better than none and successful periods of abstinence are a springboard for more lasting change.
- Remember that associating with mates who use, or being around reminders of your past use (cues) will increase your likelihood of relapse.

Remain optimistic 😊. Pessimism is not useful and can only set you back. **Be confident** that things will improve in the future and that you will build on the changes you have made.