

## Alcohol Reduction/Withdrawal/Abstinence

### What is alcohol?

Alcohol is the most widely used drug in Australia and ingrained in many social and cultural activities.

It is a depressant drug that slows down messages travelling between the brain and body.

The Australian guidelines recommend no more than 10 standard drinks a week and no more than 4 drinks in one day to reduce the risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury.

### Alcohol and mental health

Research shows a relationship between people who are dependent on alcohol and increased mental health issues. People with mental health issues may drink more alcohol to self-medicate. This can lead to longer-term anxiety and depression.

### Dependence & Tolerance

People who regularly use alcohol can become dependent, feeling the need for alcohol to go about normal activities; working, studying, and socialising, or just to get through the day.

An alcohol tolerance is the need to drink larger amounts of alcohol to get the same effect. People who develop a tolerance and dependence to alcohol experience more alcohol-related harms.

## Withdrawal

Giving up alcohol is challenging because the body must get used to functioning without it.

Withdrawal symptoms can start within a few hours after the last drinks and can last for two to seven days.

Withdrawal symptoms can include:

- sweating
- tremors
- nausea
- anxiety, irritability, difficulty sleeping
- seizures/fits
- poor appetite
- delusions and hallucinations
- death.

Accurate assessment is essential prior to commencing an alcohol withdrawal & dependent on the capacity of the client to provide relevant information, understand the treatment options available, and willingness to consent to treatment.

The potential severity of alcohol withdrawal syndrome is important to understand & fall on a continuum from mild to severe.

Assessment includes a thorough medical examination to identify the presence of concurrent physical & mental conditions or illnesses.

A history of previous alcohol withdrawal symptoms experienced is important in treatment planning (E.g., seizures, psychosis, hallucinations, and delirium) to medicate correctly & reduce the risk of reoccurring.

### **Pathology request completed & emailed to client**

It is suggested to complete a thorough pathology test to have baseline data on the health of all organs. A pathology test examines samples of your body's tissues, including your blood & urine for diagnosis and treatment of diseases and other conditions present. This is completed by the nurse practitioner & is bulk billed.

Liver enzyme function is an important test suggested for clients who are concerned with their alcohol consumption. Drinking large amounts & often causes the liver to have a hard time processing the alcohol, causing the liver cells to work too hard & become damaged. This damage can lead to fatty liver or fibrosis (scarring of the liver) and sometimes cirrhosis (serious liver damage).

Engagement in AOD treatment offers an opportunity for screening sexually transmitted infections, hepatitis, and HIV infections as an extra health examination (if client chooses).

The client can attend any Dorevitch Pathology Centre to complete the bulk billed pathology requests & the Nurse Practitioner will review all results with client.

### **Withdrawal Medication Support**

Low dosage diazepam is prescribed for safe management of withdrawal symptoms such as tremors, nausea, headaches, sweats & seizures, making the withdrawal period more comfortable.

The period of benzodiazepine support is 7-14 days dependent on level of alcohol consumed & individual withdrawal symptoms experienced.

Medication management of alcohol withdrawal includes

**Prescriptions for withdrawal medications emailed directly to you chosen pharmacy for collection.**

The onset of alcohol withdrawal usually occurring 6–24 hours after a client's last alcoholic drink, withdrawal symptoms tend to peak over 36-72 hours, and usually completely subside within 5-7 days.

It is important to medicate a client to reduce the severity of withdrawal symptoms in the initial 7 days of ceasing alcohol consumption.

The Nurse Practitioner will prescribe medications required to support withdrawal:

- Prescriptions are emailed straight to client Pharmacy of choice.
- Medications are Webster Packaged by pharmacist for 7 days.
- Your weekly medication is set out for you with correct dose, days & times. This allows correct compliance with medication required to take.

### Pharmacotherapy options

Pharmacological medications can be discussed & prescribed the Nurse Practitioner to prevent relapse in alcohol dependence either during/after the withdrawal process.

Medications approved for the treatment of alcohol use disorders and listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) are acamprosate (Campral) and naltrexone.

## References

Alcohol & Drug Foundation, 2022, 'Alcohol'.

Accessed 19/06/22; <https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/alcohol/>

Turning Point, 2022, 'Alcohol And other Drugs (AOD) Withdrawal Guidelines'. Accessed 17/06/2022;

<https://www.turningpoint.org.au/treatment/clinicians/aod-withdrawal-guidelines>

Hepatitis NSW, 2022; 'How does alcohol affect the liver?'

Accessed 01/06/2022.

<https://www.hep.org.au/liver-health/alcohol-liver-health/>