

COVID-19 advice for those managing alcohol dependency



We know how important it is for you, your family and friends to understand how to manage alcohol dependency at this time, especially when Coronavirus may also be affecting supplies of alcohol.

If you experience withdrawal symptoms such as shaking, sweating, nausea or headache after several hours without alcohol, **please do not suddenly stop drinking** as these signs mean that you are likely to be physically dependent (so need to drink alcohol regularly) and you will go into alcohol withdrawal (where the body reacts to not having its regular alcohol intake).

Alcohol withdrawal has serious complications and if not managed correctly can be fatal. It should therefore not be undertaken without support from a health care professional for example from your local Drug and Alcohol treatment Service.

If you start to have the below symptoms:

- Seizures
- Confusion
- Experience things that aren't there (hallucinations)
- Double vision

Then you must ring 999 for an ambulance.

You can reduce your alcohol and hopefully avoid the above serious complications by following the below safety advice:

- Set yourself a goal to cut down and gain control, please follow the steps below and remember you can discuss this process with your drug and alcohol service.
- Complete a drink diary which means writing down how many drinks you are having and how many units they add up to.
- Try to space out your drinks, particularly in the middle of the day, while keeping your drinking at the start and the end the same.
- Take thiamine vitamins which should be prescribed for you.

We expect the benefits of this to be:

- Having a lower risk of running out of alcohol and going into untreated withdrawal
- Reducing the damage alcohol does to your body, by reducing your daily intake.
- Feeling more stable in the amount you are drinking

Once you have stabilised your daily intake for one week, start to cut down slowly by following the below:

- Cut down by no more than 10% of your total units per day: add up your total amount drunk in units per day, divide that into 10 parts – each part is then 10% ie 1/10th.
- Then work out how much less you need to drink each day to cut down by no more than 10% per day. Ideally, cut down by 10% every four days, particularly those drinking more than 25 units per day.

Important advice for people who drink more than 30 units of alcohol a day.

During this Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic you should **not** try to stop drinking without medical treatment if:

- You usually drink more than 30 units of alcohol a day (30 units is about one bottle of spirits, three bottles of wine, 12 pints of normal strength beer, 7 cans of 9% super lager or 4 litres of strong cider)
- You suffer from epilepsy or have had fits or delirium tremens (DTs) in the past

If either of these applies to you, you should try and keep your drinking steady, without having heavy binges or days completely without alcohol, until it's possible to arrange a planned alcohol detox with medical support.

If you start to experience withdrawal symptoms, this means you are cutting down too quickly. Stabilise for one week and then cut down by 5-10% each week. Keep in contact with you Drug and Alcohol service so that they can support you through your reduction.

Tips to help you reduce your alcohol intake:

- Enlist the help of loved ones – if they can help to measure or monitor, and store your alcohol for you, it will be easier for you.
- Move over to a lower strength drink: e.g. replace one can of your high strength lager with a standard strength lager
- Measure out your drinks
- Add water or a mixer to drinks or alternate soft drinks with alcohol
- Pay attention to your diet – limit sugar intake, eat brown rice, pork, nuts and wholemeal bread to help your body get more thiamine which helps to protect your brain
- Make sure you are taking your thiamine as prescribed.
- Keep well-hydrated
- Seek support e.g. via online AA meetings, telephone 1:1s with keyworker

If you would like to stop but feel you cannot do this on your own, then please discuss this with someone from your local drug and alcohol treatment service

Daily Reduction:

Step 1: work out how much you usually drink	Work out how many units you usually drink in a day - be honest.	
Step 2: make your plan	Stay at your usual level of consumption for about 3 days. Measure your drinks carefully	If you are having shakes or sweating abnormally, you might have miscalculated your daily units. Check and if necessary, drink a little more
Step 3: reducing daily Each day, drink a little less than you did on the previous day, aiming for these milestones	Day 1 drink a little less Day 2 - three quarters (75%) of usual consumption Day 3 drink a little less Day 4 - Half (50%) of usual consumption Day 5 - continue to gradually reduce your consumption through Day 6 Day 7 Day 8 - zero consumption	Withdrawals will often peak on these days, so make sure you use the support of friends, family or your Forward Leeds worker If things seem to be getting worse rather than better, contact Forward Leeds for advice or phone 111

If at any stage, you develop more severe withdrawals (fits, hallucinations and confusion), you or someone supporting you should immediately call 999 and advise them that you have these symptoms.

Nutrition

You must eat regularly and drink plenty of water

Planning eating times and cooking can be very helpful. For example, if you do not wish to eat until the end of the day then an activity of during the day could be to cook a healthy meal, then leave it in the fridge so when appetite is improved, a wholesome meal is already prepared and can just be heated up.

It's important that you eat foods that contain thiamine as alcohol depletes the body of this essential vitamin which can lead to damage to your body and especially your brain. Thiamine rich foods include pork, beef, nuts peas and wholemeal bread

Budgeting

Manage your money to make sure that there is enough alcohol for each day as far in advance as possible.

Sleeping

You may find during this period that you don't sleep as well as normal, this is common. You might like to try the following which may help:

- Keep regular sleep hours. Going to bed and getting up at roughly the same time every day will program your body to sleep better
- Create a restful sleeping environment.
- Your bedroom should be a peaceful place for rest and sleep, temperature and light should be controlled
- Make sure your bed is comfortable.
- Cut down on caffeine before bedtime
- Speak to your local drug and alcohol treatment service for advice

There is lots of information you can get from the following websites;

NHS Alcohol Guidelines: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-support/>

AA Mutual Aid: <https://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/>

Safe storage: <https://www.choiceandmedication.org/humankind/generate/poster-methadone-safety.pdf>

Sleep hygiene:

<https://www.choiceandmedication.org/humankind/generate/handyfactsheetsleephygieneextra.pdf>

Thiamine: <https://www.choiceandmedication.org/humankind/generate/pillthiamine.pdf>