

Community & Home Detox Service: Information for family whānau and support people

Friends and family of people withdrawing from alcohol and other drugs often report how difficult and stressful it can be watching loved ones go through withdrawal. There can be times when supporters feel unsure of how to help, what to do, what not to do, and where to turn when things aren't going smoothly.

One of the most important factors in supporting someone through withdrawal is how much you know about what's going on: the more you know about what's happening, what to expect, and what to do, the better you'll be able to support the person and take care of yourself. The Community & Home Detoxification Service (CHDS) team are available to provide you with support and answers to your questions.

Planning ahead

It helps to plan ahead when someone is intending to withdraw from alcohol and/or other drugs. Things you need to consider include:

- Your own availability: how much time can you spend with the person going through withdrawal? If it turns out that you can't be available as often as might be necessary, what other options are available for the person? You can discuss this with the CHDS nurse
- Is it realistic that the person stays at your place? If not, how much time do you have to visit them at their place or wherever it is they're doing their withdrawal?
- What does 'support' mean? Taking someone meals, dropping their kids at school, spending the evenings with them? It helps to clarify exactly what is expected of you and to be realistic about what you can and cannot do
- What happens when someone is going through the withdrawal process? Are you familiar with the process?
- Your own need for support. You and the person planning to withdraw may choose to involve another person or people so you get some 'time off'. It's important that you have someone to talk to and get support from – a friend, counsellor, doctor, or support group. You are welcome to attend a CADS Family & Friends group

You can talk these things through with the CHDS nurse and the person planning to withdraw.

During the withdrawal process you can provide support by:

- Understanding that the process of getting back to "normal" can be difficult for someone who has given up alcohol and/or other drugs
- Trying to "stay with today" rather than worrying about the future
- Encouraging the person to build their recovery capital/ resources and supports such as attending counselling or fellowships like AA/NA, or reconnecting with people who don't use alcohol and other drugs – no one strategy works for everyone and it can take time for people to find what works for them
- Helping organise the person's time or activities. Distract and reassure the person withdrawing especially if they are experiencing cravings. (Cravings are a normal part of the withdrawal process.) Concentrate on getting them through the next half-hour rather than thinking long-term. When they feel more settled, talk with them about the pros and cons of returning to alcohol/drug use, why they've chosen to withdraw, their goals and how incredibly far they've come – and if the big picture's too big or the future's too scary, go back to getting through the next half hour

- Helping the person develop stress management techniques such as relaxation, yoga or complementary therapies. And if they do try some of these while going through withdrawal encourage them to stick with it
- Listening and trying not to be judgemental.

All of this can be difficult and tiring. There may be times when you feel frustrated, tired, or impatient with the person you're helping. It's okay, this is quite normal. Take time for yourself. It can be helpful simply to go to another room and try to relax. Or head outside for some air; spend some time in the garden. You may need support for yourself. You can contact the CADS units on 0800 845-1818 to find out about groups for family members and friends of people who use alcohol and other drugs.

The physical symptoms of withdrawal

The severity of withdrawal symptoms vary from person to person. The symptoms can be uncomfortable and unpleasant but they will pass.

Alcohol withdrawal, while manageable, carries some risks, the main ones being withdrawal seizures and the onset of delirium tremens (DTs). Seizures can occur occasionally and unexpectedly. If the person has a seizure:

- Remain calm
- Remove any obstacles and dangerous or sharp items from around the person
- Phone 111 for an ambulance. Inform emergency services how long the seizure has lasted.

Once the seizure has finished:

- Make the person comfortable – put a pillow under their head
- Put person on their side in the recovery position
- Inform the GP and the CHDS nurse.

Severe withdrawal

Another potential risk is Delirium Tremens (DTs) though this is very rare. If the person becomes confused, anxious, or experiences hallucinations contact your CHDS nurse or GP.

Post withdrawal

Sometimes the most difficult time for the person is when the worst of the physical withdrawal symptoms have passed. For many this is a time of boredom and depression, being on an “emotional roller coaster,” having to cope with emotions which have previously been suppressed by alcohol/ drugs. The process of ‘getting back to normal’ can be difficult for someone who's given up alcohol/drugs so they are going to need your ongoing support through this.

Be prepared to deal with this 'new' alcohol/drug free person on new terms. If you are the person's parent or sibling it's likely that your relationship has changed and a new one needs to be created. Some family members find this difficult so do seek help. See below.

Looking for help?

CADS offer groups specifically for family friends and support people. For more information, give Auckland CADS a call on 0800 845-1818 Mon-Fri 8.30am-5pm

CADS also have a booklet available Contacts for Family & Support People. It contains information on other support services available throughout Auckland. Please ask for a copy if you would like one.

For confidential advice, support or information contact Alcohol & Drug helpline on 0800-787-797 10am to 10pm daily.