

A guide to safe drinking before your alcohol withdrawal

This guide is for those people who have moderate to severe alcohol withdrawal and have been told to keep drinking prior to their medicated withdrawal from alcohol.

We know this probably seems a little unusual however we need you to keep drinking. Your body has become convinced it needs alcohol to survive and it will react unpleasantly if it doesn't get it. If you stop drinking now it is very likely that you will go into alcohol withdrawal.

Maintenance drinking is safe drinking

We want you to be as safe as possible while you wait for your medicated withdrawal so recommend 'maintenance drinking'. This is quite different to the kind of drinking people are usually doing when they come to CADS.

Maintenance drinking means you have small amounts of alcohol at regular intervals. This keeps your alcohol levels steady so you won't experience withdrawal symptoms before your medicated withdrawal starts.

Typical symptoms of alcohol withdrawal	
Nausea	You feel like being sick and/or vomiting
Shaky	Your hands shake and you feel shaky inside
Sweaty	You may feel hot and sweaty especially during the night
Anxiety	Feeling uneasy and/or apprehensive
Agitated	Feeling restless and/or distressed, unable to get comfortable or settle
Numbness	Your fingers/ hands and toes/ feet may feel numb and/or tingling
Sensitivity to noise	Noises can agitate and some people hear noises or voices that aren't real (auditory hallucinations)
Sensitivity to light	Your eyes are very sensitive and you may need to wear sunglasses. Some people see shapes, things, objects or people that aren't real (visual hallucinations)
Headache	May be accompanied by a heavy or 'full' feeling in the head
Feeling disoriented, like your senses are 'cloudy'	Not knowing what time or day it is or not knowing where you are or remembering the names of those around you. This is an extreme withdrawal symptom and only occurs in a small percentage of people experiencing alcohol withdrawal.

Directions for maintenance drinking

1. When you notice the first signs of withdrawal drink a small amount of alcohol
2. Stop drinking when your symptoms of alcohol withdrawal settle
3. Withdrawal symptoms will return. When they do you need to drink just enough to control them again
4. Repeat this cycle, just enough to control your alcohol withdrawal symptoms.

You may drink less while maintenance drinking. *Remember* the aim is to stop you going into withdrawal and to stop you becoming intoxicated.

How much alcohol to need to drink before withdrawal symptoms start

- We will work this out with you. Each person is different in how much alcohol they need to hold off withdrawal symptoms
- Only purchase what you need each day. This will help you keep to your limit
- Take note of your withdrawal symptoms
- Drink small amounts frequently in order to control symptoms
- It may be safer to change the type of alcohol you drink if what you drink makes you unwell e.g. change to wine instead of spirits or beer instead of wine.

Why alcohol withdrawal needs medical help

Withdrawing from alcohol can be risky. Doing it without medical help can be life threatening because of complications such as cardiac arrhythmias (where the heart goes into a spasm and doesn't pump blood efficiently) and seizures (like an epileptic seizure).

When a person has an alcohol withdrawal seizure they become unconscious and their body shakes for a period of time. When the person wakes up from the seizure they are often disoriented and it can take some time for them to feel normal again.

The best way to avoid having an alcohol withdrawal seizure is to practice maintenance drinking until you can start your medicated withdrawal.



If an alcohol withdrawal seizure occurs phone an ambulance on 111

Drinking and driving

We recommend you do not drive while maintenance drinking.

Ask your local bottle store if they deliver alcohol. If not take a taxi or ask a friend or relative to get the alcohol for you. (You may wish to share this information with your support people to help them understand maintenance drinking).

Ask for help with any transport needs and care of your children's care and any other responsibilities you may have while you are maintenance drinking. It is a temporary measure that will help keep everyone safe until you have completed your withdrawal.

Maintenance drinking will reduce potential harms to yourself and others; you will be less likely to do things that hurt yourself or others.

Need to know more?

If you need more information please phone CADS on 0800 845 1818 (Mon – Fri 8.30am – 5pm)

Or the Alcohol & Drug Helpline on 0800 787 797 (24/7) or alcoholdrughelp.org.nz