

Harm reduction strategies for alcohol dependence

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Advice on cutting back or stopping drinking alcohol

If you are dependent on alcohol stopping drinking suddenly could kill you

Is this advice for me?

This advice is for you if you plan to cut down or stop drinking and are at risk of withdrawal symptoms.

Am I at risk of alcohol withdrawal symptoms?

- Do you drink over 15 units of alcohol every day?
15 units is about a ½ bottle of spirits, 1½ bottles of wine, 6 pints of regular strength beer, 3 cans super lager or 2 litres of strong cider.
- Have you had withdrawal symptoms in the past when cutting back or stopping alcohol? (these can sometimes take up to a few days to start)
- Do you regularly drink alcohol soon after you get up to relieve shakes, or sweats?

If you have answered yes to any of the above, you will need to do some planning to cut down or stop your drinking.

Why is this advice important during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic?

If you are drinking heavily, you are at increased risk of the health impacts of coronavirus (COVID-19). You may want to cut down or stop drinking to help improve your immunity, or because your supply of alcohol is running out.

During the pandemic, there will be less support available from NHS and other services although many local addiction (alcohol and drug) services will have phone or on-line support and in some cases they may be able to offer medical support.

What might I notice if I cut down or stop?

People often experience sweating, shaking, and feeling sick and anxious. These typically last around a week. Sometimes people get more serious symptoms, which need medical help, but being organised can help reduce your risks.

What are the more serious symptoms to look out for?

- if your symptoms get worse, such as severe shaking and profuse sweating
- seizures (fits)
- seeing, hearing or feeling things that aren't there (hallucinations)
- feeling confused about where you are, what time it is, who you are with
- poor coordination and unsteadiness on your feet

If you get any of these more serious symptoms call 999 immediately or get urgent medical help through A&E

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 1 bottle of spirits, 3 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 do need to cut down, you should contact your addiction (alcohol and drug) service – find your local service by clicking [here](#). They should be able to offer you phone advice and support. In some cases, they may be able to arrange a detox with medical support.

How do I cut down or stop drinking?

If you usually drink daily (but less than 30 units a day) and have not had serious withdrawal symptoms (described above) in the past, you can plan to cut down and stop drinking by following the steps below.

Before you start to cut down:

- If you are living with a family member or friend, ask them to support you in cutting down- it will be easier and safer. Show them this advice.
- If you live alone, talk to family and friends by phone or online about your plans and ask for their support. Show them this advice.
- If you have children, you could explain what you're trying to do. They might need extra support from family or a specialist helpline – contact details are below
- Contact your alcohol worker if you have one
- You can contact your local addiction (alcohol and drug service) for support - find this by clicking [here](#).
- Make sure you have enough food and necessities.

Step 1: Work out how much you usually drink

Work out how much you drink a day. Be honest! You may know this already or you could work it out from what you normally buy or keep a diary of your drinking for around 3 days. You can use a drink calculator <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-support/calculating-alcohol-units/>

Tell the person supporting you how much you are drinking each day so they can support you.

It's easier if you stick to one kind of drink only, so decide which drink you will use.

Step 2: Make a plan

Once you know how much you usually drink, stick at that level for around 3 days and monitor how you feel. Look out for shakes and sweating. Write down what times of day are most difficult for you.

Measure your drinks carefully using the same glass or measuring cup each time

If you are already experiencing symptoms, check how much you are drinking again and if necessary drink a little more to keep your drinking level over 3 days

Set a day to start cutting down and tell the people supporting you

Some withdrawal symptoms (such as sweating) are like symptoms of Coronavirus (COVID-19) so be aware of this.

If you also have:

- A new and continuous cough
- A temperature

You may have coronavirus, you should follow the advice on isolation.

Step 3: How to reduce gradually and stop your drinking

It's important to cut back on what you drink each day at a pace that works for you. Better to make a bit of progress each day than to try to go too fast, find it hard and give up. It could take about eight days to cut right back. Sometimes it will take longer. The table below shows how you could do this.

People often find the drinks in the middle of the day the easiest to stop. And if you drink spirits, try reducing the measure of alcohol and increasing the mixer gradually.

Withdrawal symptoms often peak on days 2 and 3. Plan your support on those days.

You are aiming for a soft landing. If symptoms such as sweating, shaking or anxiety are very uncomfortable, or you are vomiting, you are probably reducing too quickly, and you may need slow the reduction down. If vomiting persists, call 111.

If you experience seizures (fits), seeing or hearing things, confusion, unsteadiness on your feet or problems with co-ordination, call 999 immediately or go to A&E for medical help

Reducing daily:

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	withdrawals will often peak on these days, so make sure to use your supports
	Day 3	drink a little less	
	Day 4	Half (50%) of usual consumption	
	Day 5	continue to gradually reduce your consumption	If things seem to be getting worse rather than better, contact your local community alcohol/ addiction service for advice or phone 111
	Day 6		
	Day 7		
	Day 8	zero consumption	

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.

Step 4: Looking after your physical and mental health

It may take time to improve your sleep. Sleep depends on routine and improves with practice. So be patient, stick to a sleep routine. Sleeping tablets are rarely helpful so try not to use them

During a detox it's very important to pay attention to your diet -eat foods which have plenty of vitamin B1 (Thiamine). Try soups if it's hard to keep food down.

If you are prescribed thiamine, make sure you take this regularly

Drink lots of water or tea, which is better than coffee/soft drinks. Avoid energy drinks.

Keep in touch with family and friends, and with your alcohol worker if you have one. Use phone and on-line support. There are lots of great organisations (See below) Once you have successfully stopped drinking, it's best not to start again. It's all too easy for your consumption to creep up and you will have to detox again.

Other help

For you:

- Drinkline is the national alcohol helpline - Call 0300 123 1110 (weekdays 9am to 8pm, weekends 11am to 4pm).
- Find your local addiction or alcohol support service - <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/other-services/Alcohol-addiction/LocationSearch/1805>
- Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) Call 0800 9177650
<https://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/>

For your children and family:

- Childline – Call free on 0800 1111 or visit <https://www.childline.org.uk/>
- Nacoa helpline – Call 0800 358 3456 (2-7pm) email helpline@nacoa.org.uk (12-9pm) or visit <https://www.nacoa.org.uk/>
- Al-Anon Family Groups – Call free on 0800 0086 811 or email helpline@al-anonuk.org.uk