

Managing your own Withdrawal

A guide for people trying to stop using drugs and or alcohol

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This booklet has been written for you if you are thinking about stopping, or wanting to stop, drinking or using drugs even if just to give your body and brain a break for a while.

Information in this booklet will help you understand what's going on in withdrawal. It also includes suggestions about how to make it easier on yourself and the people you care for. You may also find it helpful to talk it over with your GP or other health care worker.

No booklet can cover everyone's experience of withdrawal as we are all unique, but there is a good chance you will find something useful in here.

You may also find other options such as counselling, alternative therapies and self help groups such as AA, NA and peer support groups helpful to support you through withdrawal.

The Alcohol Drug Helpline has trained workers available for telephone support.

Freecall from your landline or mobile

10am to 10pm 7 days a week

Alcohol Drug Helpline 0800 787 797

Māori Helpline 0800 787 798

Pasifika Helpline 0800 787 799

With thanks to **Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre Inc** and **Nelson Addiction Service** for permission to use their material.

Making the Decision

You would not have started drinking and or using drugs if you didn't enjoy it, but like most things you can have too much of a good thing. The downsides are different for everybody so it is a good idea to figure out just what's happening for you that makes you think it's time to have a break or quit using.

You may find it helpful to write down what the 'good things' and the 'not so good things' about drinking or using drugs have been for you. When you can see the pros and cons in black and white it can make it all clearer and easier to make a decision.

Many people find stopping or staying stopped is difficult because even after making the decision they still miss some things about drinking or using drugs. This is normal and it takes time to find things to do to fill the gap.

Another reason many people find it difficult is that they forget the 'not so good' things about using, why they wanted to stop in the first place. Keeping your list of 'not so good things' handy will be a good reminder.

Whatever your reasons for stopping are, and whatever your long term goals are, at this point getting through withdrawal is the job ahead of you.



Things I don't like about drinking or using drugs

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____
- 7 _____
- 8 _____
- 9 _____
- 10 _____

Things I like about drinking or using drugs

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____
- 7 _____
- 8 _____
- 9 _____
- 10 _____

About Withdrawal

Withdrawal

Most substances, including alcohol, used regularly over time cause changes in the chemistry and structure of our body and brain. Our bodies adapt to having that substance on board and only feel 'normal' when using the substance. When you stop using your body and brain have to adjust. Withdrawal is your brain getting used to working 'normally' again without the substance. Each substance has different withdrawal symptoms depending on what changes using that substance has caused in the brain. Some symptoms are hardly noticeable while some can be extreme and go on and on.

There are a lot of different things that will affect how long and intense your withdrawal will be.

They include:

- what you have been using
- what else you have been using at the same time
- how much you have been using
- how often you have been using
- how long you have been using
- how you have been using (drinking, smoking, snorting, injecting)
- how healthy you are generally
- if you have any mental or physical health issues
- your attitude
- the support you get from family, whānau and friends

If you expect withdrawal to be hard it probably will be, though knowing what could happen can help. However people are different and even people with a similar history can have very different experiences of withdrawal.

Withdrawal symptoms

This is a list of features of withdrawal that are common to many substances. Not all happen for every substance and not everyone will go through all or possibly any of them. Most serious symptoms will last for one to two weeks at the most but some problems could drag on longer.

Severity	COMMON	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• restlessness• agitation• irritability• anxiety• disturbed sleep• intense dreams, nightmares• poor concentration• memory problems• cravings• aches and pains• nausea• no appetite
	LESS COMMON Time to talk to your doctor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• vomiting• diarrhoea• sensitive to sound, light and touch• low mood• suicidal thoughts• racing or irregular heart beat• heavy sweating/chills• shakes/tremor
	GET URGENT MEDICAL HELP	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• high blood pressure• hallucinations(seeing, feeling, hearing things that aren't there)• delusions and psychosis(believing things that aren't true or not knowing what is true)• seizures• confusion• disorientation• loss of consciousness

Severe withdrawal from *alcohol, benzodiazepines, GHB and inhalants* can be lethal. Going through withdrawal from any of these on your own is risky and could be dangerous, especially if you have a history of long term heavy use, previous detox's, seizures, liver or other health problems or are taking medication for mental health issues. Talk to a health professional before attempting to stop using any of these substances. If they say to keep drinking or using until you can be seen by a doctor or specialist nurse it is for your safety not because they don't want to help you

Before you stop!

Organise support

While you could do it on your own, it will probably be easier to go through withdrawal with some support from your family, whānau, friends and your GP or other health care worker.

You may also want to

contact the **Alcohol Drug**

Helpline (0800 787 797) to talk with a trained worker who can be available to support you throughout the withdrawal. AA, NA and peer support groups can also provide support.

The people around you need to be supportive, available and aware of what you may go through. If they know what is going on then they can help when it gets hard. Before you start make a list of people you can rely on but avoid anybody that is not going to support you, people who are likely to offer or use drugs in front of you and people who will just irritate you. You might like to give your support people this booklet to read so they can better understand what you are trying to do. Use your support people to screen phone calls and visitors, look after dependants and to spend time with you if boredom and loneliness hit.



People that will support me

What they can do to help

1	_____	_____
2	_____	_____
3	_____	_____
4	_____	_____
5	_____	_____
6	_____	_____

Things they can do: bring around meals, drive to meetings, help with housework, play cards, talk and listen

Organise a safe place

For some people, trying to stop and go through withdrawal while people around you are still using is just too hard. You might be able to do it but why make it any harder than it needs to be? Find somewhere to stay where people don't use, such as;

- a friend, family or whānau member's home where using friends can't get hold of you
- a quiet motel
- stay at your own place but put the word around that you will be away, unplug the phone and don't answer the door
- tell people you are stopping using and for them to keep away for a while

People or places to avoid

Why to avoid

1	_____	_____
2	_____	_____
3	_____	_____
4	_____	_____
5	_____	_____
6	_____	_____

Planning the days and the nights

Getting through withdrawal can be easier if you have plans in place for how to use the time on a day to day basis. While at first you may feel like doing nothing, after a few days you will feel more energetic and it's good to have some options about what to do with that energy. Having a planned routine (getting up at a set time, showering, having breakfast and so on) can help deal with the blahs, mood swings and 'cravings'. Making a list of the things you enjoy doing and treats for successes which help you to relax and avoid using can be useful as a reminder when in withdrawal.

Things to do during the day and at night

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____

What about: a movie, a massage, reading a book, cooking favourite food, a picnic, a walk in the bush or on a beach?

Medication

While some medications can reduce the severity of some withdrawal symptoms, nothing will stop the symptoms completely. There is no 'magic pill' for withdrawal. Your GP may be able to support you with medication for sleep if that becomes a problem, but the quality of sleep will not be the same as natural sleep and the script will only last for a very short time.


If a problem with depression or anxiety develops during withdrawal, and doesn't go away in a week or two, then medication might help you deal with the worst of these feelings.

Some alternative or natural therapies can help with withdrawal symptoms. However some products can have unwanted side effects so rather than self medicate it is better to get advice from your GP, pharmacist or a trained alternative therapist. Your local health store is likely to have a list of alternative or natural therapists that you could talk to.

Getting Through Withdrawal

Cravings

Powerful urges to drink or use are normal and are expected during withdrawal.

- cravings are common
 - cravings are not caused by lack of motivation or willpower but are due to your brain slowly adjusting to no alcohol or drugs being in your system
 - cravings come and go and are only intense for short periods, usually less than an hour, though this can feel like forever
 - cravings can be triggered by stress, distress, unhappiness and pain
 - cravings can also be triggered by anniversaries and celebrations
 - cravings will get more intense if people start talking about using or use in front of you
- 
- cravings can still occur after withdrawal when triggered by paraphernalia, people, places and moods but over time they will become less intense and not last as long
 - cravings reduce in power the longer you go without using. if you don't use they will lose power over you

Dealing with cravings

Cravings are likely to happen so get ready for them and if you have a way to get through the time that they are really intense they will be easier to deal with.

Tip 1 Put it off for another minute or five

When cravings are at their worst the question will be “Will I.....Won’t I?” as you struggle with the need to drink or use and the desire to not do it. The longer the battle the more anxious you become and the more intense your cravings. Don’t fight it just put off the decision for a minute or five minutes at a time. You may use, you may not, that’s a decision to make after each bit of time has passed.

Tip 2 Get busy

Cravings take a lot of mental energy and space so getting busy with something else will starve them of fuel. Listen to music (not your favourite party music though), listen to and go through a relaxation exercise(p14), garden, watch a DVD, do a jigsaw, exercise or whatever works for you...remember your list. Your ability to concentrate and do complex things can be reduced in withdrawal so don’t expect to be able to do anything too complicated. This includes driving and operating machinery – so safer not to drive or operate machinery.

Tip 3 I haven’t used for the past hour – well done me!

After an hour the cravings will have changed in intensity and this is a good time to remind yourself about your reasons for not wanting to use. Look at the list of things you didn’t like about using to remind yourself where you have been and congratulate yourself for getting through the last hour.

Tip 4 Take a breath

Breathe slowly and deeply and imagine that cravings are a wave you are body surfing/boogie boarding and ride it, getting to know what your thoughts are and how your body feels as the wave crests and breaks, losing power and washing over you. Get to know your cravings and record them for the future. Don’t try to ignore them hoping they will go away.

Sleep Problems

As your brain and body adjust to functioning without alcohol or drugs you may find it difficult to get to sleep and when you do sleep you could have broken nights with disturbing dreams or nightmares.

It can take weeks for the return of normal sleep patterns, especially if you have been drinking or using heaps for a long period of time. During this time it is important to remember that sleep problems are normal in withdrawal and that they will pass.

This will be hard to remember on those nights when you get hardly any sleep, but eventually your body will demand sleep and you will sleep.



What helps to sleep	What doesn't help to sleep
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • go to bed only when sleepy • apart from sex your bed is for sleeping, not reading or watching TV • use a relaxation exercise to get to sleep at night in bed • if you don't fall asleep after 30 minutes get up, go to another room and do something that does not require much thinking, go back to bed when you feel sleepy... repeat as needed till asleep within 30 minutes • get some exercise during the day and get tired out, whatever you have enjoyed in the past will be easiest • get up at the same time every morning no matter how long you have slept to train your body to use the time in bed for sleep • having hot drinks like chamomile tea, milk and some relaxing teas at night can help to get to sleep. • health food shops have products, like valerian and kava kava, tart cherry and 5Htp to help with relaxation and sleep • tart cherry juice is a source of natural melatonin and encourages natural sleep patterns • 5Htp (5-hydroxytryptophan) also helps with sleep, but should not be used with antidepressants or St John's Wort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • don't nap during the day • rather than thinking and worrying in bed take time during the day to write down what's on your mind so that when you go to bed you can say to yourself, "been there done that, it's time to sleep"... repeat as needed • don't allow yourself to fall asleep during relaxation exercises during the day • avoid coffee, caffeine drinks, energy drinks and cigarettes, especially at night, as they are all stimulants and will make it harder to get to sleep • small amounts of alcohol can put you to sleep, but only for a while after which you will be wide awake • Zopiclone and benzodiazepines will put you to sleep but will not allow your body to readjust to its natural rhythms and after a week or two your body adapts to them and when you stop taking them it's back to square one (they are also very addictive) • while some antidepressant medications can reduce anxiety and improve sleep they can have unpleasant side effects and can be dangerous in high doses so use only under supervision • avoid kava kava or valerian products if you have liver disease

Nightmares

Nightmares are pretty common in withdrawal and can be very frightening. Sometimes it is helpful to write your dreams down and or talk to your support person about them. Try to reassure yourself that they are only dreams and not reality.

- drink plenty of fluids, especially water and natural fruit juice, to replace lost fluid
- avoid a fatty diet as fats tend to overload digestion
- eating a lot of dairy food should also be avoided, especially in the evening

How to Relax

It's common to get agitated and irritable during withdrawal so knowing how to relax is really helpful. There are a lot of ways to relax and most of us normally use a range like: listening to music, watching TV, reading a book, having a warm bath or going for a walk with a friend.

Sometimes however our usual ways of relaxing are not enough and it helps to have a specific relaxation method to help you wind down when really tense. A pre recorded audio relaxation exercise is available for free download at:

www.matuaraki.org.nz/images/stories/Relaxation.mp3

Download and listen through your headphones or sound system.

If you do not have access to the internet, try this:

- lie down or sit in a comfortable chair in a room where you will not get interrupted
- take your shoes off and loosen any tight clothing
- close your eyes and pay attention to your breathing pattern
- start to breathe slowly and take air down towards your stomach
- hold your breath for four or five seconds, then breathe out slowly, emptying your lungs as far as possible
- keep breathing in a regular pattern during the next steps
- after several minutes of concentrating on your breathing start individually tensing each part of your body while breathing in

- Start by tensing your toes, hold your breath for 10 then breathe out while relaxing
- return to regular breathing pattern for four breaths
- repeat with your feet before moving up to your calves, thighs, buttocks, stomach, hands, arms, shoulders and then your jaw
- finish up by tensing your whole body

After completing these steps imagine yourself in a calm and peaceful place that you know well. Try to visualise the place, hear the sounds of it and the feel of being there, all the time keeping your breathing steady.

- enjoy as long as you want
- when you are ready, tell yourself to open your eyes, while staying relaxed and alert

Generally paying attention to your breathing is a great way to reduce anxiety and stop it running away with you. A simple breathing technique is to count to three as you breathe in, hold for a second or two, then count to three as you breathe out. Keep this up until your heart rate slows down.

Dealing with aches and pains

Most aches, pains and headaches are caused by increased muscle tension during withdrawal and usually only last for a week or two.

Tips to ease the aches and pains:

- warm baths, spas or saunas with essential oils
- massages from family or friends
- light exercise like walking, swimming or stretches
- medication, such as aspirin and paracetamol, can help but overuse can be dangerous
- ensure your environment is quiet
- rub a little lavender oil into your temples
- sometimes running fast on the spot for a minute or so gets the blood circulating back to tense muscles
- try and do some gentle stretching exercises
- apply a hot water bottle or heated wheat bag to the sore area, this warms the muscles and helps relax them

- cold flannels to the back of neck or forehead are soothing.
- sit quietly and get your support person to massage your head by starting at your ears and working towards the top of your head in a circular motion
- massage into the ‘V’ that your thumb and index finger make, this may hurt if you do it too hard but steadily applying pressure for 60 seconds at a time might help
- headaches are often caused by dehydration, so drink plenty of fluids to help avoid this

Hot Sweats

- hot sweats often happen at night
- slightly cool showers are okay to take in the middle of the night, have one as often as you need to
- change your sheets and your pyjamas to keep dry and comfortable (have a supply on hand)
- keep a cold flannel and a towel beside you to wipe and dry your face and hands
- replace fluids by drinking at least 2 litres of water a day

Cold Sweats/chills

- keep warm by wrapping up in a blanket or put on extra clothing
- change your sheets when they become too damp
- have frequent warm showers
- drink plenty of water and natural fruit juices to replace lost fluids
- massage your arms and legs to stimulate blood flow
- have a warm bath with essential oils or radox
- move around to improve circulation and increase your body heat

Mood Swings

Being aware that the mood swings are a normal part of withdrawal will help you make sense of how you are feeling. At times you may feel exhausted, worn out, down and unmotivated to do anything. At other times you may feel restless, agitated, anxious, irritable, reactive and angry.

The relaxation techniques described earlier can help along with regular exercise, a good diet and sleep.

For the majority of people these mood swings will pass quickly but depression can become a significant problem for some people.

If a low mood lasts longer than three weeks talk to your GP or other health worker.

Paranoia

Paranoia is not unusual while using some drugs like cannabis and methamphetamine but it can also be a problem during withdrawal. Being paranoid does not mean you are going mad (even though it feels like it) and the thoughts generally fade away as long as you don't use.

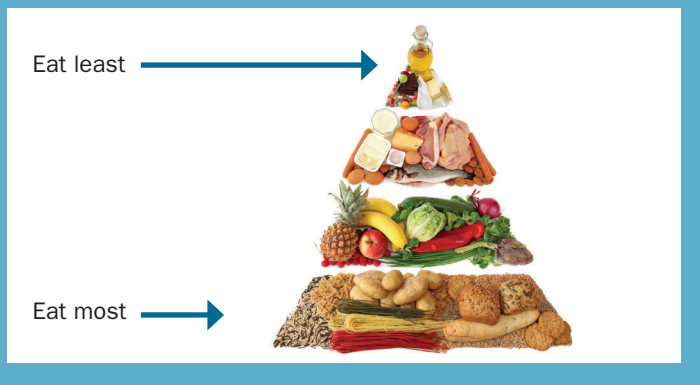
If the thoughts keep going or get worse over one or two weeks then you need to talk about them with your GP or another health worker.

Diet

Many people who drink or use drugs heavily eat junk food, take-aways or at irregular times. To feel better it helps to start to eat well and regularly again, preferably fresh fruit, vegetables and lots of protein.

A multi vitamin supplement can give you a boost to help you start to feel better. If you have been drinking heavily taking 200mg of Vitamin B1 a day may help prevent possible serious brain damage.

People often crave sugar or chocolate when they are going through withdrawal. This is because your body got used to your blood sugar being raised due to using drugs or alcohol. When not using alcohol or drugs your body craves sweet foods. It's better to try and eat small and nutritious meals or frequent snacks as this will reduce sugar cravings and help manage your withdrawal symptoms.



Nutritious foods include:

- fresh fruit
- dried fruit
- lentils and beans
- nuts and seeds
- vegetables
- cereals like muesli or porridge
- dry crackers
- rice
- yoghurt
- pasta

Try to include breakfast in your daily routine. Looking after yourself like this will help you start to feel better as well as feel healthier.

It's also good to drink lots of fluids that don't contain caffeine, sugar or alcohol. Drinking a lot of water or vegetable juices helps flush toxins out through your kidneys.

Diarrhoea

Diarrhoea can be a symptom of withdrawal from many drugs. It may be accompanied by stomach cramps and nausea and be really uncomfortable. Some things that might help to reduce discomfort are to:

- drink plenty of fluids, especially water and natural fruit juice, to

replace lost fluid

- avoid a fatty diet. Fats tend to overload the digestion. Dairy foods should be limited also
- vaseline, zinc cream or baby oil will soothe a red and irritated bum and prevent further burning when going to the toilet

It's too hard!

Sometimes withdrawal feels like it will just never end. The end may be two days away or it may be two weeks away but while you are in withdrawal that just seems like forever.

The best way to deal with these thoughts is to stop thinking about the next few days or weeks and focus your thoughts on now. How do I make it to tomorrow without using? If that's too far away, how do I get through the next hour without using?

Break up the withdrawal into short periods and deal with each period as it happens.

If you get part way through withdrawal and feel like you can't go on, remind yourself that you have survived the last few days without using. Whatever you have been doing has been working, so just keep doing it.

Sometimes to get through these hard times it can be helpful to talk to someone else. This could be a close friend, someone from your family or whānau, your GP, the Alcohol Drug Helpline, a health worker or someone from AA, NA, a peer support group or your local addiction service.

Traps

Using a different drug to help you get through withdrawal is really risky. It is very easy to see-saw from one substance to another. Just because it's different does not mean it is a 'safer' substance for you to use. Withdrawal is about your body and brain getting back into kilter without having drugs in your system. Using something else instead won't help your body get back to normal.

When to get help

If you or your family or whānau notice any of the following symptoms, or are concerned about your wellbeing and how you are feeling, it is important to quickly get medical advice from your GP or the 24 hour health helpline:

Healthline 0800 611 116

- uncontrolled ongoing vomiting
- ongoing diarrhoea
- high blood pressure, possibly showing up as pounding headaches and or dizziness
- pounding or racing heart or irregular beat
- shakes and tremor
- heavy sweating or chills
- hallucinations
- delusions and psychosis
- disorientation and confusion
- seizures
- loss of consciousness

After Withdrawal

One day you will realise that you feel much better and that you are through the worst of it. It's a good idea to have a plan about how to treat yourself for having made it this far, something that does not involve drinking or using of course.

Now's the time to think about what to do next. Again it can help to talk to someone else about your options, especially if you want to stay stopped. This could include seeing a counsellor, talking to friends, family and whānau, going to a peer support group or attending AA or NA meetings. You may decide to go to treatment at an addiction service or move away from drinking or drug using mates. It is important to plan your next moves carefully as parts of your life will be very different now you are not drinking or using drugs.

What happens if I have a ‘slip?’

Giving up is not easy. Staying stopped is hard and many people have a slip and drink or use at some stage. **This does not mean that you have failed and it is important not to beat yourself up if it happens to you.** A slip is not a landslide and does not mean you have returned to old patterns.

Every slip is an opportunity to learn more about what triggers using for you. With this knowledge you can make changes in your life that help you avoid using in the future. Sometimes it takes more than one go to get it right but it will happen.

Remember that for some drugs, especially opiates, if you do use again after being off for a while your tolerance will be low and could be as low as when you first used. It's very easy to overdose especially if you also use alcohol or other drugs at the same time.

If You Need More Help

The Alcohol Drug Helpline can provide ongoing support and contact details for your nearest addiction service

0800 787 797

TRANX supports people withdrawing from benzodiazepines in Auckland and will provide resources elsewhere

09 356 7305 or **0800 800 717 (ah)**

NA (Narcotics Anonymous)

0800 628 632 www.nzna.org

AA (Alcoholics Anonymous)

0800 229 6757 www.aa.org.nz

Notes

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