



# Alcohol in-patient detoxification

Information about alcohol in-patient detoxification at APU, Western Isles Hospital

The doctors or nurses looking after you are concerned that your health problems may be due, in some way, to drinking alcohol. Because of this you have agreed to an alcohol detoxification treatment within the Acute Psychiatric Unit (APU) at Western Isles Hospital. This factsheet is to explain what this means for you.

You should ensure that you pack sufficient clothing, toiletries and other supplies (such as books, snacks, etc) with you for your in-patient stay, which may be between 7-10 days, depending on medication-assisted treatment needs. Please note that access to a washing machine for laundry requirements is available during your stay on the ward.

Drinking too much alcohol, especially if you do this regularly, means you have a higher risk of alcohol withdrawal when you stop drinking. The team looking after you need to know how much you drink to be able to help you with any withdrawal.

## What is alcohol withdrawal?

When you stop drinking your body has to get used to the alcohol not being there. This can cause withdrawal symptoms which can include:

- feeling shaky, unsteady or trembling
- feeling more nervous or anxious
- difficulty in sleeping
- nausea or vomiting
- sweating
- fits or seizures
- fatigue
- restlessness, confusion, agitation, hallucination.

The process of managing these symptoms is called alcohol detoxification, or 'detox'. A detox is not life threatening as long as it is managed carefully.

## What happens during a detox at APU?

A doctor will examine you and ask about your alcohol use.

A nurse will then use a special assessment tool called GMAWS (the Glasgow Modified Alcohol Withdrawal Scale) to check for withdrawal symptoms. They will check your blood pressure and pulse, and ask you a few questions. You may also be breathalysed. The nurse may have to wake you to do this.

The doctor or a nurse prescriber will then decide whether they need to give you medicine to

reduce your withdrawal symptoms.

If medicines are needed it will usually be Diazepam or Lorazepam. These are sedative medicines that act as a substitute for alcohol in your brain. It lets your body adjust gradually to the lack of alcohol. This makes coming off alcohol less risky.

Sometimes this medicine can make you feel drowsy and dizzy, and may make you unsteady on your feet. Because of this, we may ask that you do not leave the ward for the first 72 hours following your admission, as you will need to be checked regularly by the nursing staff and given medicine regularly, as soon as you need it. In some instances, you may be asked to remain on the ward in excess of the first 72 hours. Any time out from the hospital will be negotiated in agreement with yourself, nursing and medical staff.

You will be asked to identify up to four people, who you feel will be supportive of your hospital detox, and who will visit you. You should be aware that visitors may be refused entry to the ward, or asked to leave, if they are thought to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

If you normally smoke then please tell your nurse or doctor. They can arrange for you to have Nicotine Replacement Therapy (i.e. patches, inhalator, gum, spray, etc).

Your withdrawal symptoms will be checked regularly by nursing staff, and if you are on detox medicine you will be given it as required. The dose will be gradually reduced as you need less and less of it. Coming off alcohol usually takes just a few days at most.

Your doctor may stop your detox medicine and discharge you if you drink alcohol whilst having your detox treatment.

## **Essential Vitamins (Vitamin B1)**

Your brain and nerves need vitamin B1, also called thiamine, to work properly, so that you can walk, see, talk and remember things. Many people who drink too much alcohol don't have enough thiamine in their brains.

Drinking alcohol can make you feel full, but it doesn't provide you with the nourishment your body needs, so you may not eat enough food to get all the vitamins you need. At the same time your body uses thiamine to break down alcohol. The more you drink, the more thiamine you need and alcohol stops your body taking in thiamine from the food you do eat, so you can end up with dangerously low levels of thiamine, and other vitamins.

If you do not have enough thiamine, then you may experience:

- difficulty walking
- blurred vision
- slurred speech
- blackouts
- poor memory
- slowed reaction times
- numbness and tingling in your hands and feet.

Continued low levels of Vitamin B1 can cause damage to your brain.

During a detox you will be offered thiamine replacement, and the best way to get this is by injection. These injections contain thiamine and other vitamins, and are inserted into a large muscle by an IM (intramuscular) injection, perhaps for up to five days. After this you will be offered

thiamine tablets which you should take for at least six months after stopping drinking.

You may also be referred to the dietician during your in-patient stay for advice about your diet.

## **What support is there during my detox?**

If you have a detox at APU you will be offered the chance to speak to your named nurse from the NHS Western Isles Substance Service during your stay, and you will also be seen by the medical team. You may also be offered input from an Occupational Therapist. You will have an allocated nurse in the hospital who will be responsible for your care during your stay.

The medical and nursing staff will look more closely with you at your alcohol use, and how it is affecting your health and your life. They will use this assessment to see what support you might need, if any. The support may be in hospital, with your detox, or for when you go home.

The medical and nursing staff will be able to explain how alcohol affects your health, as well as offering advice and support on recognising and overcoming any problems linked with your drinking.

## **What will I do after my detox?**

You might decide that you wish to stay off alcohol completely (be abstinent). The medical and nursing staff can explain some options you have to help with this. This may be through support, medicines, or most likely both.

There are some medicines that can help reduce cravings for alcohol, however they can't get rid of all the cravings. So whilst you should expect to get some cravings, you will be helped to learn to cope with them.

The medical and nursing staff will also let you know about other services that are available to help you remain abstinent when you leave hospital.

You are in the process of making a huge change that will improve your life and help you move on from alcohol use. This process does take time, and it will help if you are open and honest about your thoughts and feelings. You may find it helpful to speak to family, friends, your Substance Service link nurse or APU nursing and medical staff on the ward or alternative local or national services, (see lifestyle leaflet).

## **What options do I have?**

Depending on your health there will be choices that you can consider.

Any alcohol could be harmful and the more you drink, the more potential harm there may be. Usually, it is best to stay off alcohol completely, even if only for a short to medium term. This will allow your health to improve and give you time to examine your life and lifestyle with a clear head. If your health is very poor, for example if you have liver disease or cirrhosis (permanent scarring of the liver), it would be best to stop drinking alcohol completely. This will give your body, your liver and your brain the best chance to recover.

## **What can I do now?**

It may be useful for you to think about the following:

- how does alcohol impact on your life, relationships, your employment, finances health and family? In fact how it can affect all areas of your life.
- why you drink alcohol?
- what do you like about drinking alcohol?
- what don't you like about drinking alcohol?
- what would your life be like if you cut down or stopped drinking alcohol?

You could also:

- try to think of at least 5 benefits of cutting down or stopping drinking. It can help if you write these down
- think about the times you might have stopped or cut down drinking in the past:
  - did you make the decision to stop?
  - did you get help from anyone?
  - did you feel better after making that change?

While you are in hospital, and likely to have some time on your hands, it is an ideal opportunity to give these questions some thought. If you wish you can talk things over with the nursing staff on the ward or your Substance Service link Nurse.

## Confidentiality

We realise that it might be difficult for you to speak about your alcohol use. You may feel embarrassed or fearful about the effect on your relationships or job.

Please be assured that your health information is confidential. Any information you give us will only be shared with the staff that are looking after you in hospital, or in any agreed follow-up care after you leave hospital.

However, if you tell us something that puts you or others at serious risk, we may need to disclose this information, even if it is against your wishes.

## Further help and support

If you are in hospital don't be afraid or embarrassed to ask the hospital staff or your allocated ward nurse, to further explain about your health problems, treatment plan or tests being carried out. You can also ask to speak to your Substance Service link Nurse about support following discharge or any concerns you have about your drinking

### **NHS Western Isles Substance Service**

Health Centre, Springfield Road, Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, HS1 2PS. Tel: 01851 703069.

You can also view details of local and national services via our Lifestyle Support leaflets, which can be accessed at: [www.wihb.scot.nhs.uk/our-services/nurse-led-services/substance-misuse-nurse-service](http://www.wihb.scot.nhs.uk/our-services/nurse-led-services/substance-misuse-nurse-service)

You may also find the following websites useful, both during and after you leave hospital:

- Drinkaware 'Drink less alcohol' - [www.nhs.uk/better-health/drink-less](http://www.nhs.uk/better-health/drink-less)
- NHS 'Drug addiction: getting help' - [www.nhs.uk/live-well/addiction-support/drug-addiction-getting-help](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/addiction-support/drug-addiction-getting-help)

If you are alcohol dependent, remember that cutting down the amount you drink too quickly is not safe, as it may cause you to have severe withdrawal symptoms and can increase your risk of withdrawal seizures.

Ensure you get the right support plan for reduction agreed with your named nurse at the NHS Western Isles Substance Service.

## **We are listening - how did we do?**

We welcome your feedback, as it helps us evaluate the services we provide. If you would like to tell us about your experience:



- speak to a member of staff
- share your story at: [www.careopinion.org.uk](http://www.careopinion.org.uk)
- visit our website: [www.wihb.scot.nhs.uk/feedback](http://www.wihb.scot.nhs.uk/feedback)
- tel. 01851 704704 (ext. 2236), please leave a message on the answering machine if no one is available to answer.