

Assessing Health, Promoting Wellness

Alcohol and Drug Withdrawal

This article provides basic information about substance use withdrawal. This information is only for guidance; individuals not trained in medical care should always consult a licensed doctor with questions.

The use of harmful or habit-forming drugs, including alcohol, is a serious problem. People usually begin drinking alcohol or taking drugs to escape hardships or calm the pain in their daily lives. This use contributes to many health problems, including addiction. If the person tries to stop using the alcohol or drugs, it can be dangerous and even lead to death if not done carefully. As a care provider, you can help those who want to stop using alcohol or drugs by knowing the signs and symptoms of withdrawal and calling for help when it is necessary. Your kind and supportive actions can help a person feel safe and find the strength to get better.

What to ask:

- When was the last time you had a drink or took _____ (drug)?
- Have you ever experienced withdrawal? If so, does this time feel the same?

Symptoms of withdrawal usually begin between 5 hours up to 10 days after the last alcohol or drug use.

What to look for:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Shaking
- Fever or sweating
- Anxiety or restlessness
- Itching skin
- A feeling of pins, needles, burning, numbness, or bugs crawling on the skin
- Sounds that disturb the person (you may not be able to hear these sounds)
- Sensitivity to light
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Agitation
- Confusion about person, place, or time

Call help if...

The person experiences any of the above symptoms. Withdrawal from alcohol or many drugs can change and become dangerous very quickly.