



First Nations Health Authority  
Health through wellness

# DETOX AND WITHDRAWAL

Attempting to detox from alcohol, opioids, and benzodiazepines without support from a health care provider can be harmful. Detox without support can lead to serious and life-threatening complications. If you are supporting a loved one (or community member) who is in withdrawal, this resource can help you understand when it's safe to detox at home, withdrawal symptoms, and when and where to get medical help.

## UNDERSTANDING DETOX AND WITHDRAWAL

**Detoxification (detox)** is the process of the body and mind getting rid of the chemical effects of substances that have been stored in the body over time.

**Withdrawal** describes the symptoms that the body experiences during detox. These symptoms will be different for each person and can depend on the substance(s) they have been using, how long they have used the substance(s) for, how often they used the substance(s), and any health issues they might have.

Individuals may want to take a holistic approach to supporting their detox and withdrawal, one that focuses on balancing their physical, mental, spiritual and emotional needs to guide them on their healing journey. This may include the use of both Western medical and traditional/cultural approaches.

### FIRST STEPS

It is important for individuals who are considering detox to first get assessed by a health care provider to make sure the right supports are in place for a safe journey. Taking the time to develop a plan with a health care provider and support team can help to make sure that everyone involved understands what to expect, how to manage common symptoms, and when to get emergency medical help. Together, this can improve the experience, safety, and success of the withdrawal process.

Depending on the individual and their needs, detox and withdrawal management might take place in a:

- Medical detox facility where there is 24 hour medical care.
- Home or Community-based detox with medical and community support available. Medications can be prescribed to help manage the serious side effects that may arise.
- Cultural or land-based healing detox without medical support (this option can be included in Western medical options as well).

## **WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS AND TREATMENT**

Common withdrawal symptoms include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Loss of appetite
- Difficulty sleeping and feeling restless
- Bowel changes – diarrhea or constipation
- Stomach pains
- Headaches
- Sweating or feeling very cold
- Watery eyes and runny nose
- Muscle and bone aches
- Shaking in hands (Tremors)
- Seizures or hallucinations (medical emergency – call 9-1-1)

When supporting someone who is detoxing from substances it is important to know that the symptoms that they experience will change as they move through the process, and can get worse before they get better.

**To help prevent unexpected emergencies it is recommended:**

- The person is assessed by a medical professional before they start detox
- That they have a safe place to detox, with supports in place, so they can be monitored for the first 4 days
- That there is appropriate food and hydration available (Gatorade or other electrolyte drinks)

**As well, it's important to ask these questions:**

- Do they have a history of seizures or delirium tremens (DT's)?
- Are they hallucinating (seeing things that aren't there, hearing voices)?
- Are they shaking a lot and are unable to stop?
- Are they pregnant?
- Do they have any other significant health concerns?

If the answer is yes to any of these questions, they need medical supports.

Putting judgements aside, respecting privacy, knowing when to get medical help, and who to call for support are all important parts of supporting the detox and withdrawal process.

**A few ways that someone with mild withdrawal symptoms can be supported include:**

- Warm Epsom salt baths
- Gatorade or electrolyte drinks
- Making a dark and quiet place for them
- Listening to music
- Going for a walk
- Doing activities that bring happiness
- Drumming/singing
- Connecting with an Elder
- Joining a talking/healing circle
- Using traditional medicines that support your wellness

## **OPIOIDS AND DETOX**

Quitting “cold turkey” or withdrawing from Opioids (heroin, fentanyl, oxycodone, oxycontin, dilaudid, morphine, codeine, methadone) without medical support is not recommended as it can cause severe withdrawal symptoms which are associated with high rates of relapse. In addition, quitting cold turkey from opioids can lead to a decrease in tolerance which can increase the risk of overdose and death if an individual returns to opioid use.

For those who are planning to stop using illicit or prescribed opioids, Opioid Agonist Therapy (OAT) is recommended as a safe and effective treatment option over detox alone. OAT involves the use of medications such as methadone, suboxone, slow-release oral morphine, and sublocade, to support those with an Opioid use disorder to manage their withdrawal symptoms and improve their day-to-day function.

To connect with an OAT prescriber in your area use this link ([bccsu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/OAT-Clinics-Accepting-New-Patients.pdf](https://bccsu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/OAT-Clinics-Accepting-New-Patients.pdf)) or call 1-855-344-3800 to book an appointment with the First Nations Virtual Doctor of the Day (please note that appointments may not happen immediately, and should not be used for emergency medical treatment).

## **BENZODIAZEPINES AND DETOX**

Withdrawal from benzodiazepines without medical support is of great concern as it can lead to life-threatening complications. Detox in a medical facility is almost always recommended. It is important to talk to your health care provider when thinking about stopping benzodiazepine use to make sure the right supports are in place to make it a safe withdrawal process.

## ALCOHOL WITHDRAWAL

Withdrawal from alcohol without medical support can be very dangerous, especially if there is a history of seizures when stopping alcohol use.

12 HOURS	12-48 HOURS	48-72 HOURS	4-7 DAYS
Mild symptoms often begin in the first 12 hours after the last drink and may include headaches, anxiety, stomach pains, nausea and trouble sleeping.	More serious withdrawal symptoms may take place between 12-48 hours after the last drink, including hallucinations and seizures. These symptoms require immediate medical attention.	By 48-72 hours after the last drink is the time when severe and life threatening symptoms may arise including fever, sweating, fast heart rate and DT's. If a person is experiencing these symptoms they require urgent care.	Withdrawal symptoms often start to improve after day 4 and will continue to improve over the next 4 to 7 days.

It is important to visit a health care provider before detoxing from alcohol to make sure the right supports are in place. Often withdrawal is done in a medical detox facility, but home detox might also be an option with the right supports in place, including medications that can be prescribed to help manage withdrawal symptoms.

### IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

The illicit drug supply across BC has become highly toxic and unpredictable with the addition of synthetic substances including fentanyl, carfentanil, and benzodiazepines. Often it can be difficult to know exactly what is in a substance, and it is possible to be exposed to substances without knowing. This can make the detox process more complex as withdrawal symptoms can be hard to predict.



## DETOX SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES

### FNHA Virtual Doctor of the Day

1-855-344-3800 (Toll-free, 7 days a week 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.)

[First Nations Virtual Doctor of the Day](#)

### FNHA Virtual Substance Use & Psychiatry Service

Provides virtual specialist support in addictions medicine and psychiatry.

FNHA Virtual Doctor of the Day, or your usual medical professional, can refer you to the

[Virtual Substance Use and Psychiatry Service.](#)

### BC Centre on Substance Use

24/7 Addiction Medicine Clinician Support Line

<https://www.bccsu.ca/24-7/>

778-945-7619

### Mothers and Babies Advice Line (MaBAL)

<https://www.fnha.ca/what-we-do/ehealth/maternity-and-babies-advice-line>

MaBAL provides services to guardians/caregivers of newborn babies in rural and remote First Nations communities in BC

**To support your mental health and wellbeing, you can reach out to:**

### KUU-US Crisis Line Society

24 Hour Crisis Line for Indigenous people across BC

Adults/Elders Line: 250-723-4050

Youth line: 250-723-2040

Toll-free: 1-800-588-8717

### Indian Residential School Crisis Line

National service for anyone experiencing pain or distress as a result of their residential school experience.

604-985-4464 or;

Toll-free crisis support (24/7)

1-800-721-0066

### Counselling

Various services are available through the FNHA Health Benefits.

Before booking an appointment, call 1-855-550-5454 or visit

[fnha.ca/benefits](https://fnha.ca/benefits) to ensure the service is eligible for coverage.

To access cultural support and counselling support services, you can call the Tsow-Tun Le Lum Society toll-free line at 1-888-403-3123 or their main office at (250) 390-3123.

If you are considering treatment or need help navigating pathways, please refer to the Pathway to Treatment document for further options: [fnha.ca/Documents/FNHA-Pathway-to-Treatment.pdf](https://fnha.ca/Documents/FNHA-Pathway-to-Treatment.pdf)