

# ACUTE ALCOHOL WITHDRAWAL

When someone has been drinking a lot for a long time, they're in danger of going through *acute alcohol withdrawal* if they stop abruptly. People who have experienced withdrawal before know that it's extremely uncomfortable, and the thought of going through it can be frightening. It can also be life-threatening for people to go through by themselves. With support, people who want to reduce or stop their drinking can make a plan to do so safely.



## WHAT'S ACUTE ALCOHOL WITHDRAWAL?

Alcohol slows down your nervous system. If someone drinks a lot of alcohol every day, their nervous system speeds up in response. This change is called *tolerance*. If they suddenly stop drinking, the nervous system is still sped up, and it takes several days to slow back down to its normal state. This is called *acute alcohol withdrawal*.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Tremor when reaching for something is a common symptom of acute withdrawal. Other symptoms include sweating, headaches, vomiting, and anxiety. Acute withdrawal can also have dangerous complications. Some people have seizures, irregular heart rhythms, or delirium tremens/DTs (delusions and hallucinations). There's a snowball effect with withdrawal: complications get more likely the more times you go through withdrawal, and these complications can have long-term effects on your health.

Symptoms of acute withdrawal usually begin 6 to 12 hours after the last drink and they usually start to get better by day 3, but they can last up to 7 days. If you have at least 5 drinks daily and you find that you start drinking because of anxiety, shakes, or sweating, you're probably going through withdrawal every day. How bad your symptoms are depends on several things, like how long you've been drinking and how much you usually drink in a day.

## WHAT CAN I DO?

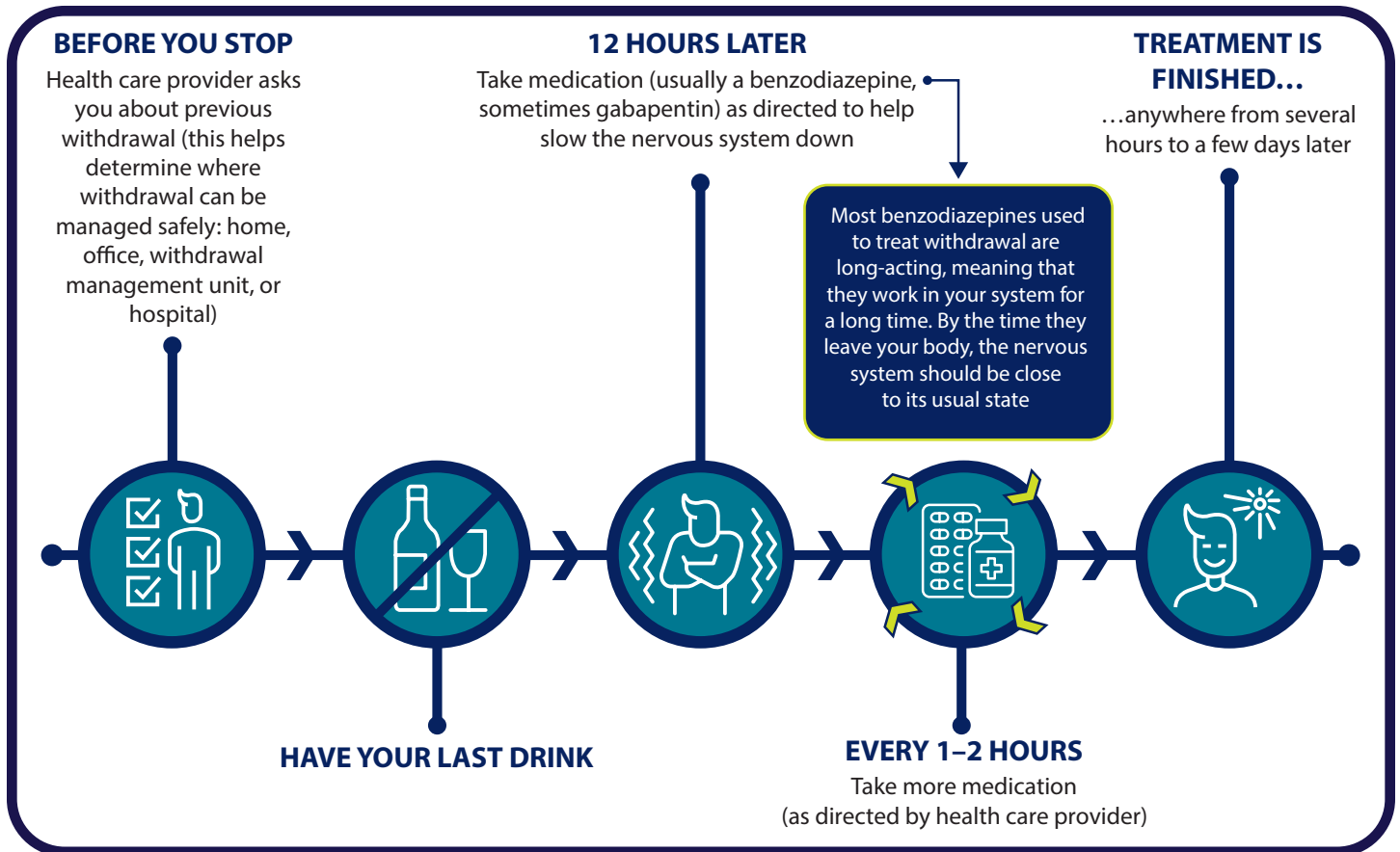
If you want to reduce or stop your drinking but get withdrawal symptoms when you try, you should talk to a health care provider to make a plan. You might decide to arrange a *planned withdrawal*, where your withdrawal symptoms are managed with medication and any complications are treated. Another option is a tapering plan, where you reduce your drinking gradually so that you won't get withdrawal symptoms.

## WHAT IF I GO COLD TURKEY?

If you experience withdrawal symptoms when you don't drink, stopping drinking abruptly without support is very dangerous. **Complications of alcohol withdrawal are life-threatening, and going cold turkey puts you at serious risk of long-term harms or death.** Whether you decide to go through a planned withdrawal or taper your drinking, it's very important that you do it with help.



## WHAT HAPPENS DURING A PLANNED WITHDRAWAL?



## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?



After the acute withdrawal stage is over, most people experience *post-acute withdrawal*, which can last for several weeks. During this period, you may struggle with anxiety, fatigue, insomnia, and urges to drink as the nervous system continues to calm down. It's a good idea to have a treatment plan in place, which could include **anti-craving medication**, counselling, and/or peer support, to help you get through this period.

[www.metaphi.ca/wp-content/uploads/Pamphlet\\_AUDMedication.pdf](http://www.metaphi.ca/wp-content/uploads/Pamphlet_AUDMedication.pdf)



Talk to your health care provider to make a treatment plan together. If you don't have a health care provider, a rapid access addiction medicine (RAAM) clinic might be a good option. Try to remember that recovery doesn't happen all at once, and that you don't have to do it all by yourself. Reaching out to someone you trust might help you feel like you're not alone.

<https://www.metaphi.ca/raam-clinics>

## HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

If you have any questions about alcohol withdrawal, you should speak to your health care provider. You can also find more information and resources on the META:PHI website.