Alcohol withdrawal: Virtual Acute Care Unit

This leaflet is for patients who are discharged home following a stay in hospital with alcohol withdrawal. It explains how we continue to monitor you at home to make sure your withdrawal symptoms are well controlled and you remain safe.

VACU telephone: 0118 322 5201 (8am-8pm, Mon-Sun)
VACU email rbb-tr.vhs@nhs.net
Out of hours: 111 or 999

What is the Virtual Acute Care Unit?

The purpose of our Virtual Acute Care Unit is to monitor you at home while allowing you to stay safe and comfortable. Stopping alcohol consumption after regular drinking can cause withdrawal symptoms. You have been started on medication to manage these symptoms and have been assessed as stable enough to continue your detox at home.

Before discharge, we will show you how to use a breathalyser. We will use this to monitor your alcohol level during your home detox and will explain when and how to use it. We will also show you how to use a blood pressure cuff and how to join our video calls, using your smartphone or other device, so we can monitor your progress and support you throughout your detox.

It is very important that you DO NOT DRINK ANY ALCOHOL during your detox.
If you do drink alcohol, please inform the VACU staff AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

What will happen after I go home?

Once you return home, a member of the VACU team will contact you by video call to check how you are feeling and support your treatment.

During the call, we will:

- Monitor for signs of withdrawal such as:
- Shaking/tremor
- Sweating
- Seeing or hearing things that are not real (hallucinations)
- Feeling confused (for example about time, place, or who you are with)
- Changes in mood (calm, anxious, or panicked)
- Ask you to use a breathalyser during the call

You will usually receive two video calls a day until your detox is completed.

About your medication

During detox you may experience mood swings, sleeplessness, forgetfulness, poor co-ordination and feel anxious and irritable. The medication you have been prescribed should help to reduce symptoms.

- **Chlordiazepoxide:** For the first couple of days, the dosage is very high and then it gradually decreases until you are no longer taking any. The drug acts as a substitute for the alcohol you have been taking and the idea is to gradually wean your body off the drug, so that the withdrawal is controlled and comfortable.
- **Thiamine:** You may also have been prescribed some Vitamin B Complex (Thiamine). This protects your brain and your memory functions from harm during the detoxification.
- You may also be sent home with a **breathalyser**.

Make sure you are able to attend all appointments and that you **take all medications according to the instructions you have been given**.

Alarm signs and what to do next

Seek help via 111 or 999 in the following cases:

- If you have episodes of blackouts or faints.
- If you have a seizure (fit) - this is an event where you suddenly lose consciousness and fall onto the floor; you may shake during this episode as well.
- If you have persistent vomiting and are struggling to keep your medications down.

During working hours, you can also call our Virtual Acute Care Unit number if you are not sure.

First aid for seizures (fit): advice for people witnessing a seizure

Please go through this section with the person you live with / your carer and have it easily accessible as it gives important advice for use during a seizure.

Call 999 for an ambulance. It might be scary to witness, but do not panic.

- Only move them if they are in danger, such as near a busy road or hot cooker.
- Cushion their head if they are on the ground.
- Loosen any tight clothing around their neck, such as a collar or tie.
- Turn them on to their side after their fit stopped.
- Stay with them and talk to them calmly until they recover.
- Note the time the seizure starts and finishes.
- Do not put anything in their mouth, including your fingers. They should not have any food or drink until they have fully recovered.

Are you a carer?

Carers give unpaid care to a family member, partner or friend who needs help because of their illness, frailty, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction and cannot cope without their support. The Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust is committed to recognising their valuable role. If you would like any additional support or information please speak to our team or visit our Carers Support webpage. www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/accessible-information-and-reasonable-adjustments/carers-support

Recording your symptoms

We also advise you to record your symptoms yourself four times a day - in the morning, the afternoon, the evening, and before going to bed. You can also record your symptoms at night if you cannot sleep.

Date and time	Tremor 'Shaking'			Sweating			Hallucinations 'seeing things that are not real'			Orientation to time, person and place			Mood		
	None	On movement	At rest	None	Moist	Drenching	None	Know they are not real	Unable to tell apart hallucinations from reality	Orientated	Unsure	Not orientated	Calm	Anxious	Panicked

Additional advice

Try to relax and avoid stress. This is a time for quiet walks and easy distractions, like watching television. Many people find they cannot concentrate on things like reading, but this is a temporary reaction, and nothing to worry about.

- **Diet:** Your appetite may be poor during detox but it is still worth trying to eat a little, as small frequent healthy meals will help minimise craving for alcohol:
  - Stock up some light, easily digestible foods, such as biscuits, as well as healthy foods such as fresh fruit and vegetables, cereals, wholemeal bread, fish and lean meat.
  - You will probably become dehydrated during detoxification, so ensure you are drinking plenty of water or soft drinks.
- **Safety:** Take precautions during this time:
  - Plan to take at least one week off work and do not drive during this time.
  - You must take care when performing certain tasks such as cooking and boiling water.
- **Support:** Most people undergoing detox find that they need plenty of support from the people around them - especially when they are craving a drink. A competent person should stay with you full time for the first 5-7 days until otherwise agreed with your clinician during your set up.

During detox and the early stages of recovery, you may be more vulnerable to alcohol cravings. It is important to avoid situations where alcohol is being consumed or is easily available.

Before your detox starts, remove all alcohol from your home. If someone else in your household drinks, ask if they can avoid drinking while you are completing your detox, as this can make the process easier for you. If this is not possible, you may wish to consider staying with a family member or friend who can support you during your detox.

After your detox, you may remain vulnerable to alcohol cravings, particularly during the first few days and weeks. Before you leave VACU, your after-detox plan will be discussed with you. This may include ongoing support from your GP, such as starting or continuing medication such as acamprosate, and a referral for a FibroScan to assess your liver.

You can also access additional support from local alcohol services, such as Change Grow Live (CGL) or Cranstoun. Your Alcohol Liaison Nurse may be able to refer you, or you can contact these services yourself. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is another option for ongoing support.

Information for friends or family of patients detoxifying from alcohol

- **Adjusting:** If your relative or friend has been drinking for a long time, it will take them and their body some time to adjust to being sober. During this time, the drinker is likely to be restless, irritable, moody, anxious and depressed, and they may suffer from insomnia (difficulty sleeping) and possibly be quite difficult to live with for the next few days and weeks.
- **Medication:** The medication (chlordiazepoxide) that the drinker has been prescribed should help to reduce these withdrawal symptoms. For the first couple of days, the dosage is very high, and then it gradually decreases and stops. This is because the drug is a substitute for the alcohol they have been taking, and the idea is to gradually wean them off the drug so that the withdrawal is gradual, controlled and comfortable.

  They have also been prescribed some Vitamin B1 (Thiamine), which is important to protect their brain and memory functions from harm during the detox. Please ensure they take both medications according to the instructions given.

It is very important that the drinker takes all the medication prescribed as instructed. It will help to protect the brain and mental functions and preserve memory.

- **Be careful** during the early part of detox. The medication can make them feel very drowsy and detached from reality. It will slow their reaction times and may affect their judgement. **They should not drive a car or operate dangerous machinery until after the treatment is finished.** They should take time off work to recover and will need support caring for any children.
- **Diet:** Practically, it can help if you can arrange for them to have a high quality diet. Of course, they must not drink any alcohol, and **it is a good idea to remove all alcohol from the house**. At first, they may not have much appetite but this should improve. Fresh fruit and vegetables, juices and water, wholegrain cereals, wholemeal bread, fish and lean meat are recommended. High quality diets like this have been shown to help people get better quicker and to reduce their craving for alcohol. The person can drink tea and coffee, but moderation is advised, as too much caffeine can increase sleeplessness and irritability.
- **Safety:** Although the detox process is usually very safe, it is important that you know what to do if a problem arises. Minor symptoms causing a little discomfort are to be expected and tolerated. However, any of the following is a cause for concern and should be taken seriously:
  - Confusion
  - Hallucinations (hearing or seeing things that are not there)
  - Fitting

  If you identify any of these symptoms, it is important to contact the Virtual Acute Care Unit immediately for advice or 111 out of hours. If the drinker starts fitting, call 999 and ask for ambulance service.

First aid for seizures (fit): advice for people witnessing a seizure

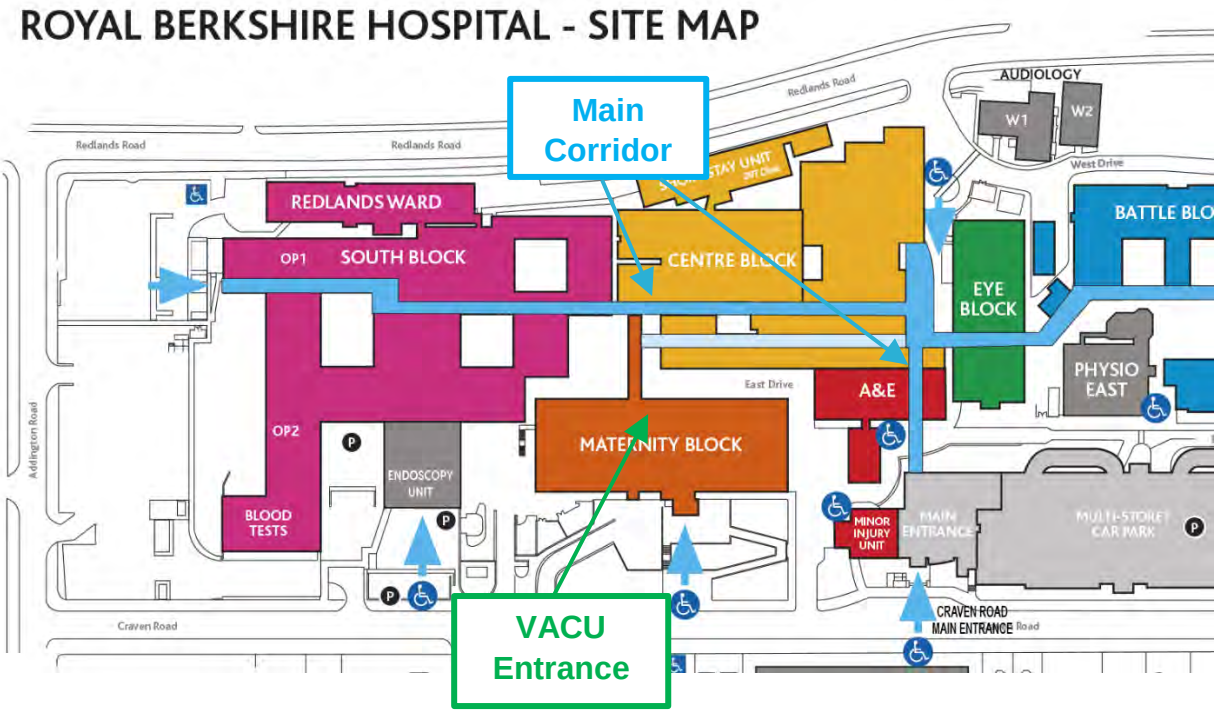
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- Turn them on to their side after their fit stopped.
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- Note the time the seizure starts and finishes.
- Do not put anything in their mouth, including your fingers. They should not have any food or drink until they have fully recovered.

Returning the devices

Once your detox has finalised, please return any equipment provided by VACU to the drop-off box located in the Virtual Acute Care Unit in **Maternity Block, level 2** – see map below. Open Mon-Sun, 8am-8pm. **Please do not return them to the Emergency Department (A&E).**



To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

RBFT Virtual Acute Care Unit
Reviewed: November 2026. Next review due: November 2028.