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Disclaimer – this article is written by someone who had an Alcohol Problem, and is not medically qualified at all. Information given is their own opinions, and experiences based on advice received. Bolton Counselling strongly suggests you contact your GP for professional advice and referral onto agencies that deal in both mental and physical withdrawal from alcohol, or controlled continued drinking. A recent report pointed to a particular gene that makes people more susceptible to dependence on alcohol. So it isn't your fault, but you need professional help.

WARNING- DO NOT ATTEMPT TO GIVE UP ALCOHOL WITHOUT PROFESSIONAL MEDICAL HELP – SUDDEN WITHDRAWAL HAS BEEN KNOWN TO BE FATAL

Hello, I will call myself James who has used the services of Bolton Counselling, the medical profession and other agencies to address my problems. The following is my experiences of excessive drinking and mine alone. You will be different from me but I hope to share my insight into this disease, which it most definitely is. I never used to drink heavily but a couple of bad circumstances combined to depress me and I started to drown my sorrows. That's how it starts for most people

Excessive alcohol consumption not only can wreck your life, the lives of others, your liver but also many other organs, including your brain. If you continue to drink heavily you will get Uncompensated Liver Disease, which means it's struggling to cope, in turn this goes with sclerosis which is where liver cells change into fatty tissue and no longer can repair themselves. The liver has a remarkable ability to repair itself right up to just before it stops working and kills you, so all is not lost just yet. It is the largest organ in your body, excluding your skin and carries out over 500 different functions.

Generally the symptoms of heavy drinking are confusion, anger, ranting on about things, personality changes, always for the worst and weight gain owing to ascites, which is fluid in the body giving a bloated appearance. Oh and going yellow, first bit to go is the whites of your eyes. You may find your urine becomes very yellow and your stools either become lighter (as the liver can no longer get rid of old red blood cells so they get diverted to the kidneys instead hence extra yellow urine- although this only happens after withdrawal as alcohol makes urine lighter or even white) or much darker which means you are bleeding somewhere inside. The bleeding is caused by a combination of the acidity of what you may be drinking, irritating the stomach lining and a rise in blood pressure owing to the liver having to work harder (Portal Hypertension).

So this leads to maybe an ulcer or varices, which is the rupturing of small veins in your throat, stomach or intestines. This is treated by shoving a camera and instrument down your throat and fixing the problem. Don't bank on an anaesthetic though; all you will get is a squirt of mouth numbing spray.

Another symptom is what is called Spider Nevi, which is a spotty rash caused by increased blood pressure. This usually appears on the back, chest or neck and face.

One of the main side effects of a damaged liver is a build up Ammonia in the blood, this then leads to effects on your brain, milder symptoms are memory loss and trouble with balance, more serious ones are hallucinations and paranoia i.e. seeing things and being irrationally worried, commonly called the DT's. One of the signs of the onset of this is shaking hands, especially in the morning before you have managed to top yourself up for the day ahead. I have found most help agencies bang on about the effect on your liver, which is obviously serious, but don't stress the important effect on your mind. If you continue to drink to excess, your liver will give up, or more likely your kidneys will fail first. This is fatal other than having a transplant but the current biased thinking is that it's self-inflicted so if there is somebody further down the list, they'll come first. Also given the lack of organs available for transplant this is not very likely unless you pay for it. That said if you were not thinking rationally, you would probably injure yourself, maybe fatally before the organs give up anyway.

Some other bad side effects are various cancers of the body, lack of calcium in the bones, so you break them easily, and a reduction in red blood cells whose job is to get oxygen around the body. This then causes fatigue, so you become depressed again because you can't do things you used to. Sleep patterns are disrupted, because it's the wrong type of sleep, and eating a good diet goes out of the window owing to a lack of appetite and the fact your nutrition-free calories are mainly coming from alcohol. I could go on.

In addition there is all the strain put on your nearest and dearest, relationship breakdown, work issues, the financial costs and an evitable run in with the Police, which I will come to later. Do not underestimate the effect you have on others. That is why people with this problem become isolated, and they tend to drink more to drown their sorrows. Unfortunately this mayhem caused to others usually does not motivate someone to get help; it is usually self-realisation owing to a bad incident caused by drinking, and a will to do it for you and you only. As I have said it is a disease, which may be genetically linked, so don't kick yourself, just seek some help. Oh, and when you do, tell them the truth about how much you are drinking, their medication levels will be guided by this – too little and you are climbing the walls within a day. They will not be judgemental and they have seen it day in and day out. Their job is to help and stop people dying and they are fed up of seeing it. Oh and people die all the time, whilst I was under treatment a 33 yr old woman died and they lost a 27 yr old man last week, that's what I know of so there must be plenty more

The good news is that if you live in the Bolton area, the NHS has a wonderful Liver Ward at Bolton Hospital, with highly trained specialist professionals (They are the best) and two support places – Wood St in the Town Centre and Giles House at the bottom of Chorley New Road. There are other agencies such as AA, which you can try and see if you like it. The Bolton system is such that after your de-tox there are support groups for along as you want them and the hospital will have you back at regular intervals to check your blood enzymes (mainly your bilirubin levels, which show how much stress your liver is putting up with) and have various scans to make sure you have stabilised or improving. Please note that a hospital detox program is a privilege, and not an excuse to continue where you left off after you get out. Trouble is you will feel a lot better and are sucked into "a few drinks wont hurt" and hey presto it's down the snake back to square one desperate to shake a six and start again. But the government in their infinite wisdom have decreed that now you can't apply again for at least six months. This is more than enough time to kill yourself given the probable state of your liver. You have to be committed

Your first place of call is your GP. As I have said, a sudden total withdrawal from alcohol CAN BE FATAL. As a starting measure your GP should order blood tests (my experience – yours may be different) then give you Strong Vitamin B tablets, Thiamine (another B vitamin as alcohol causes a lack of Vit B in your body), maybe Spirolactone to relieve fluid build up and Vitamin K to increase the clotting factor of your blood. Lactolose solution to help get rid of the ammonia. As I said I got this lot and more but it depends on your GP's opinion so don't quote me. A bit of a warning here – my first GP when informed that I thought I was drinking too much said quote “ well stop then”. This advice was criminal, as I have stated, sudden withdrawal from heavy drinking can be fatal and should only be attempted under full medical supervision. If you encounter this attitude find another GP. It is very difficult to admit you have a problem and then be rejected.

It is usual to then refer you on to a Consultant if your drinking is causing physical or mental problems. If you go into Hospital it is out with the drink and in with a serious supply of Librium to counter the withdrawal symptoms. There are private re-hab clinics but you are looking at £16,000 for a few weeks of residential detox. I have never used one and there is a train of thought that as your abstinence was carried out in a new environment, the eventual return to your old environments means old habits return, especially without the friendship of your fellow inmates. Up to you, and I repeat I have no experience of this and it is my opinion only and anyway Bolton Hospital has a fantastic facility

The Government in their infinite wisdom have placed a safe limit of alcohol; this is 14 units a week for women (that is less than one 250cl glass of wine a day) and 21 units a week for men. However what they didn't tell us at the time was these figures were plucked out of the air. I don't make a comment either way. I don't know the safe limit, if any is. I know loads of people who put away a bottle of wine a day. What effect it may have on them in the future I don't know. But you have contacted someone for help because it is having a serious and damaging effect on you, so you have exceeded your limit, probably for a long time.

But whilst on the subject I will discuss units of alcohol. This is a tricky area as your bottle or glass is not stamped with how many units you are drinking. Firstly, beer – the strength of Best Bitter used to be 3.5-4.2 ABV, Mild was around 2% and a pint of Best was classed as two units. Now, especially with premium Lagers we are looking at 5% and more. Spirits counted as 1 unit but that was for 25cl, most pubs now serve 35cl and offer doubles for £1 more, that's three units. Wine is much stronger than it used to be 12-14% ABV and a standard glass is 250cl, again that's at least three units a glass. A litre bottle of Vodka is nearly 50 units. Alcohol is cheaper than it has ever been in real terms and attitudes have changed and it is constantly available. At one time a visit to friends, you were offered Tea or Coffee now wine and beer are usually on the menu as well.

Which brings me to drinking and driving. Especially now alcohol is served being stronger and in larger measures. It used to be said, and again this is only my opinion, that a couple of pints of normal strength bitter would not put a reasonably sized man over the limit. However many factors will effect this and it is no guarantee. Now two pints of stronger larger could well be pushing it. For a smaller woman, two glasses of 250cl wine at 14% ABV is probably too much. Many people with a problem thus drink at home, but remember your body takes a bit of time to absorb the alcohol and, on average, only gets rid of 1 unit an hour.

If you have had 15 units up to midnight, you will probably still have 7 or 8 in your system at 7.30 next morning when you are driving to work or on the school run. If you injure or kill someone you are looking at a probable jail sentence, even for a first offence. In Germany it is illegal to drive whilst jaundiced, owing to lack of concentration it causes or a bilirubin level of more than 40, which is the medical definition of jaundice. 20 is the normal level. Mine was 250 when I first went into Hospital

As you drink more and more I think the body compensates, thus it means it takes more to feel the effect. Consequently after a few drinks you still feel fine to drive, but the amount in your blood is the same as someone who has just had their first taste of alcohol, had the same amount as you and is now passed out on the floor. So be very careful. The other thing is that people have their own tolerance level of alcohol, so just because you know someone who is drinking much more than you without any obvious ill-effect, it does not mean you can do the same. My problems were caused by about 25-30 units a day, I've heard of people getting through a bottle and more of Vodka a day for years, about double the amount of units.

So what does detox involve? You can do this at home under medical supervision but if you've been hitting it badly, the medical professionals will want you in Hospital, so they can monitor you and importantly, act quickly if you have an adverse reaction. I was in for three weeks, but cannot remember the first week. You will be pretty drugged up at first, but this will be gradually reduced as your body becomes accustomed to life without the drink. Once back out you will have a physical and mental support network and probably be on first name terms with your specialist nurse with regular check-ups. I found that once home, plenty of soft drinks should be available, as you will be used to drinking something on a regular basis.

It's like people who give up smoking and who use a fake cigarette for something to do with their fingers. You may be advised to stay out of Pubs, but my attitude was that I was not going to let alcohol control me, so I go and have a pint of lemon and lime, no-one comments.

You will be feeling very depressed with your problem and wonder what you have done in life to deserve it, however if you give up or bring the drinking down to a stable level (although after what you have been through the medical staff will always advise on abstinence), you will have conquered it and should be proud, given that most of the population have never climbed such a mountain.

There is still a stigma attached to heavy drinking, although very rarely now as everybody is doing it but will not admit to it, but you'll have to deal with that stigma and it is nowhere as bad as the unchangeable stigma of killing yourself.

Good Luck, it's going to be hard, believe me, but hey you've made the first step on a journey, and in the words of the Chinese Proverb, [the first step means half the journey is already over.](#)

Regards



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