

Healthy eating during treatment for alcohol and other drugs

It is widely recognised that drug and alcohol use can affect the body in different ways. The impact alcohol or other drugs (AOD) has on a person's appetite and eating patterns can affect their ability to successfully withdraw from substance misuse.

For example, people with an alcohol dependence are often disinterested in eating, and people who “binge” on cocaine or methamphetamine may not eat for many days, which can result in extreme weight loss, poor nutrition and dehydration. On the other hand, cannabis can increase appetite which may contribute to weight gain in the long term from overeating.

Poor eating habits can disrupt digestion, which can lead to a range of health issues such as constipation, diarrhoea, indigestion and poor appetite.

Regular, heavy drinking and drug misuse can also damage the body's organs. Excessive alcohol misuse can damage the liver and the pancreas—which are needed to remove harmful toxins, regulate blood sugar and absorb fat.

Healthy digestion is key to good brain function. Drugs and alcohol can damage or shut down the body's digestive processes, which can prevent the brain from receiving proper nourishment. Conversely, a person with a well-nourished brain experiences fewer symptoms during the early stage of withdrawal, which increases their chances of recovering from substance misuse in the longer term.

Healthy nutrition is often a low priority when people are trying to overcome a drug dependency with many people focusing primarily on reducing or quitting. However, promoting good nutrition should be a part of the withdrawal process and ongoing treatment plan as poor dietary habits can contribute to increased cravings and the risk of relapse.

A varied diet rich in good carbohydrates and proteins, fresh fruit and vegetables, essential fats (oily fish, nuts) and plenty of water can help minimise withdrawal symptoms.

Healthy habits during AOD withdrawal

Nutrition experts have suggested that improving nutrition can play a role in increasing a person's chances of recovery in the longer term. Educating people about the importance of good nutrition as part of a treatment program may in fact enhance treatment outcomes.

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However, many people may not be ready to focus on their nutrition as they battle cravings related to their alcohol or drug dependence.

Nutritionists offer the following food suggestions to help people in the latter stages of withdrawal avoid relapsing and/or sustain their health in the long term.

While these suggestions may not offer the immediate feel-good effects of alcohol and drugs, the benefits may contribute to a greater sense of well-being that can be more sustainable in the longer term.

May help reduce cravings	May help enhance mood	May help avoid relapse
Protein (lean meat & fish)	Seafood	Salmon
Wholegrains	Tofu	Sardines
Vegetables	Oats	Anchovies
Peas & beans	Sardines	Mackerel
Lentils	Lentils	Herring
Brown rice	Turkey	Avocado
Banana	Brazil nuts	Spinach
Turkey	Bananas	Pumpkin, sesame & sunflower seeds
Milk	Spinach	Evening Primrose oil
Seeds	Milk & Water	Blackcurrant seed oil
	Seeds	

Creating a healthy lifestyle

There are also a number of healthy practices that people can adopt to increase their wellbeing and contribute to reducing the risk of relapse.

When recovering from drug and alcohol dependency, it is important to avoid eating junk foods which can be high in sugar, salt and fatty acids.

Foods containing high levels of nutrients and vitamins can help body tissues and organs to recover from the damaging effects of alcohol and drug misuse.

Eating more of the following foods can also help to reduce cravings:

- Proteins (lean meat, fish and vegetable proteins)
- Complex carbohydrates (whole grains, vegetables, peas and beans)
- Amino acids (eggs, meat, poultry, seafood and beans)
- Folic acid (oranges, grapefruit, grapes, bananas, rockmelon and strawberries)
- B-complex vitamins (meats, fish, poultry, milk, eggs, wholegrain breads and cereals, nuts, mushrooms)

Regular exercise and rest can also help.

Avoiding relapse

Research has shown that people withdrawing from alcohol and cocaine misuse can help to lower their risk of relapse by eating foods containing the essential fatty acids omega-6 and omega-3.

Omega-3 foods

- Cold water high fat fish (salmon, sardines, anchovies, mackerel, herring and trout)
- Flaxseed oil
- Walnuts and Brazil nuts
- Pumpkin seeds and sesame seeds
- Avocado
- Dark green leafy vegetables (kale, spinach and broccoli)

Omega-6 foods

- (Pine) nuts

Avoid eating junk foods which can be high in sugar, salt and fatty acids.

- Pistachio nuts
- Raw sunflower seeds (raw)
- Evening primrose oil
- Black currant seed oil

Equally, adopting a range of healthy lifestyle choices can improve a person's physical, mental and emotional state, which can help sustain change. These include

- Exercise
- Sleep
- Sunlight
- Reducing stress
- A supportive network of family and friends
- Engaging in activities and hobbies

Further Information

The Druginfo website has information on:

- Help and support
- Drug facts
- References for this fact sheet

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treatment

Page 4 / 4

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