

**Addiction and Recovery:
What is Detox?
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

"Detox" is the beginning of the process of recovery. Most people need some kind of help getting through detox. Some people need medical help or additional structure and support. The kinds of difficulties that an alcoholic or addict will have with detox depend on a number of variables, including, personal characteristics, the specific types of drug(s), combination of drugs, length of use, amount of use, and last use.

Detox is the process where your body rids itself of the mood altering chemicals that you have been ingesting. When you use drugs over time, they build up in your system. Many drugs have a half-life. That means that if you take a drug one day, the next day you still have half of the drug you took the day before. That, along with neurochemical changes to the brain when you use, then when quit using, leads to withdrawal symptoms. The withdrawal symptoms that you will experience depend again on the types of drugs you took, the amounts, length of use, last use, etc. Different drugs have different withdrawal symptoms associated with them.

Detox services aim to help with the physical and psychological withdrawal symptoms. It involves providing support and possible medication to aid in breaking the compulsion of drug (including alcohol) use. Because the compulsion to drink or use other drugs is so strong when you are addicted, the very beginning of recovery requires intense effort and support to stay abstinent in the face of cravings that are clamoring for the drug. Detox help is often required to break this "momentum" of continuing use. People often try many times to quit drinking or using. The momentum of continuing use is so strong that much of the time, despite a desire for sobriety, "recovery" never gets off the ground. That initial break in the cycle of use never gets interrupted.

In the detox phase of recovery, the alcoholic/addict receives education and assistance in breaking through the denial that helps perpetuate the continuing momentum. They learn about the need for recovery activities and environments. This is the time when it is crucial that the patient understand that simply getting through withdrawal and breaking the momentum of use is generally insufficient in and of itself for sustained abstinence. It is a time of educating the patient and his or her family that this is but a sliver of a beginning of the process. This is the point at which the patient begins to gain information that helps to break through the denial that they are in control of the drinking, rather than the disease being in control of them.

Detox is a pretty crucial time for recovery outcomes. If the alcoholic/addict does not understand just what it is that they are up against, they can believe that this initial detox is the solution and that they have conquered this problem. This, of course, sets them up to fail, since this is just Round One.