

Chapter 13

What Is Medically Supervised Detoxification?



I have been a heroin addict for three years and am desperately trying to stop. As the withdrawal symptoms are very severe, the muscle cramps, shakes, and anxiety have always overwhelmed and so I haven't succeeded in quitting heroin by myself. Right now I feel like I have a horrible flu. I can't seem to stop my mind from racing. Someone told me to drink lots of water and just stay home until it clears. The physical stuff has been hard but I am experiencing tremendous psychological cravings. I even have vivid dreams about it.

-Evan E.

I'm addicted to Xanax. I've been told that it's a very dangerous and hard detox. A nurse I know told me that if I try to detox on my own the chances are that I will either fail or die. Her exact words were, "This is nothing to play with and it is just as deadly as trying to come off alcohol alone, especially since the class of drugs that include Xanax are just like alcohol, only in pill form." She went on to say that with my history of use, at best, if I try to do it at home, chances are I will fail, or have a seizure and die. She also said that I should expect to have trouble sleeping, be very irritable and anxious, and have difficulty concentrating, not to mention the body aches, sweats, and shakes.

Having decided to abstain from alcohol and other drugs, a medically supervised detoxification is the second step in the life-long management of the disease of alcoholism and drug addiction. The above e-mail from Arnold A. suggests the importance of a medically supervised detoxification. If you have a Substance Dependence problem, you should understand that there's much danger in stopping the consumption of alcohol and other drugs without appropriate medical supervision. For this very reason, anyone who has a Substance Dependence problem and has decided to quit their consumption of alcohol and other drugs should do so only after having consulted a qualified physician.

The purpose of a medically supervised detoxification is to alleviate the short-term physical and psychological symptoms associated with withdrawal. As we discussed in chapter 8,

What Is a Withdrawal Syndrome?, a withdrawal syndrome occurs once an individual discontinues their chronic consumption of alcohol and other drugs. Medically supervised detoxification is the process of monitoring and managing the onset of alcohol and other drugs withdrawal symptoms. Through the use of medications, a doctor is able to first moderate and eventually eliminate withdrawal symptoms. The goals of a medically supervised detoxification are:

- Management and elimination of medically dangerous withdrawal symptoms
- Reduction of the physical discomfort associated with withdrawal
- Medical management of any co-existing medical disorders
- Medical management of any co-existing emotional disorders
- Development of a long-term plan to remain abstinent from alcohol and other drugs

Medically supervised detoxification may involve:

- Symptom relief
- Constant observation
- Frequent monitoring of physical functions and condition

After successfully undergoing a medically supervised detoxification, there are different choices to consider as to how to continue long-term treatment. Those choices are:

- Doing nothing more than a medically supervised detoxification and *white knuckle it* for the long-term

- Only attend Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous
- Attend Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous and work with a qualified psychotherapist
- Attend an intensive outpatient treatment program
- Attend an intensive day hospital program
- Attend an intensive inpatient or residential treatment program

In the next chapter, *What Treatment Options Are Available to Me?*, I'll discuss with you in detail treatment options available to you and the clinical considerations of each treatment option.

