

Whole of Practice Resources

Managing a patient in distress flow chart

Assess for risk – of harm to self, staff, severe withdrawal, or overdose. Stay with the person until the effects of the substance has worn off. Call an ambulance if there are concerns about safety or severity of symptoms. If you feel intervening is safe for yourself and staff, follow the six steps outlined below:

1. Assess risk, give first aid

- Is the person severely intoxicated or in withdrawal?
- Is the person at risk of overdose, suicide, or violence to others?
- Asses for injuries that need attention.
- Treat all urgent issues and call an ambulance if life threatening.

2. Introduce yourself

- Explain who you are, your role, ask the patient's name.
- Use simple, clear, firm, but gentle speech.
- Give simple and clear instruction, repeat if necessary. Remain calm and listen.
- Avoid talking in loud voice or sudden movements.

3. Move to a safe and quiet place

- If intoxicated, remove substance if safe to do so.
- Open doors / windows (to avoid patient feeling trapped).
- Find a low stimulation environment, away from bystanders.
- Gently encourage the patient to remain calm.

4. Ensure an accurate history

- Ascertain which substances have been taken, how much and when, polydrug use.
- Other medical problems that may impact treatment.

5. Treatment options

- Is the patient low risk? Can they safely go home?
- Does the patient need urgent transfer to emergency department?
- Does the patient need psychiatric admission?
- Is there a physical condition that needs treatment?

6. Enlist the patient's support person

- Enlist a support person, family, friend, interpreter.
- If the patient is low risk, (intoxication is mild, no suicidality or risk to others) consider sending home with support person to monitor.
- early GP follow-up to review.

	Intoxication signs and symptoms	Withdrawal signs and symptoms
Alcohol	Disinhibition, relaxed, slurred speech, drowsy, dizzy ataxia, confusion, mood change, vomiting, poor memory, dehydration, CNS depressant	Anxiety, agitation, sweating, tremors, nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, diarrhoea, craving, insomnia, elevated blood pressure, heart rate and temperature, headache, seizures, confusion, perceptual distortions, disorientation, hallucinations, seizures, delirium tremens, arrhythmias, and Wernicke's encephalopathy
Opioids	Decreased respiratory rate, constricted pupils, drowsiness. Overdose: apnoea, coma, death. Risk of overdose: oxygen, naloxone, transfer to emergency department.	Runny eyes and nose, sneezing and sweating, agitation, irritability, loss of appetite, craving, abdominal cramps, diarrhoea, anxiety, irritability, disturbed sleep, fatigue, joint and muscle aches, nausea and vomiting, moodiness

Benzodiazepines	Drowsiness, ataxia, slurred speech, hypotension, bradycardia, CNS depressant	Anxiety, headache, insomnia, muscle aching/ twitching / cramping, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, perceptual changes, feelings of unreality, depersonalisation, seizures, agitation, confusion/psychosis
Amphetamines	Excitation, euphoria, tachycardia, hypertension, hallucinations, hyperreflexia, tremor, diaphoresis, flushing, dilated pupils, nausea, vomiting, hyperthermia, dry skin, paranoia	Cravings, dysphoria, anhedonia, increased appetite, fatigue, agitation, anxiety, increased sleep, vivid, unpleasant dreams and slowing of movement
Cannabis	Disorientation, reduced inhibition, poor memory, inattentive, depersonalisation, sleepy, hyperemesis, agitation	Anger, aggression, irritability, anxiety, nervousness, decreased appetite or weight loss, restlessness, sleep disturbances, chills, depressed mood, shakiness, and sweating

References

1. Clinical Quality & Patient Safety Unit, QAS 2021, [Clinical practice guidelines: Toxicology and toxinology/Alcohol – ethanol](#), State of Queensland, Queensland Ambulance Service, viewed May 2022.
2. Li, W & Gunja, N 2013, [Illicit drug overdose Prevalence and acute management](#), AFP: Australian Family Physician, vol. 42, issue 7, viewed May 2022.
3. Government of Western Australia Mental Health Commission, [Managing an intoxicated person](#), viewed May 2022.
4. Turning Point 2018, [Alcohol and other drug withdrawal guidelines, Third Edition](#), viewed May 2022.

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