

## Self detox Handout

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#### Disclaimer

This tool is unvalidated and is for guidance only. No guarantee is made that someone will become drug free.

#### **Special thanks**

Special thanks to Derby Quad's cafe for providing me the best office to work from. **www.derbyquad.co.uk** 



## **Self detox**

Relinquishing junk. Stage one, preparation. For this you will need one room which you will not leave. Soothing music. Tomato soup, ten tins of. Mushroom soup, eight tins of, for consumption cold. Ice cream, vanilla, one large tub of. Magnesia, milk of, one bottle. Paracetamol, mouthwash, vitamins. Mineral water, Lucozade, pornography. One mattress. One bucket for urine, one for feces and one for vomitus. One television and one bottle of Valium, which I've already procured from my mother, who is, in her own domestic and socially acceptable way also a drug addict. And now I'm ready.

## Introduction

This tool is designed to help people self detox from heroin. Although in the UK most areas now have only a short waiting time from first presentation to prescribing there are still times when someone may prefer to self detox. This could include situations where someone doesn't like the feeling of substitute medication, doesn't get on with the local prescribers, needs to be able to test totally drug free at work, or just wants to beat heroin themselves.

Mark Renton
Trainspotting

The supporting notes included in this handout are aimed at helping drugs workers, family members and people choosing to quit heroin themselves. They are presented assuming that the reader is supporting someone else but this is only so it's easier for me to write. I've tried to keep this tool accessible to the international community, however I'm aware that some countries have different names for the 'over the counter' products mentioned, where ever possible I've included further details to help people identify a local equivalent.

And finally, if you or someone you care about is trying to quit heroin, I wish you all the luck in the world. You can do it!



## Self detox handout

#### **Self detox**

**Paracetamol:** Great for temperature control, prevents hot/cold flushes.

**Ibuprofen:** Reduces swelling from muscle damage you'll have had while using heroin (note: it's important to eat before taking Ibuprofen)

**Buscopan:** Helps with the cramps (this can be expensive, if you don't suffer from cramps don't bother)

**Imodium:** To help stop diarrhoea. (To save money you could instead use full sugar Coca Cola that has been allowed to go flat, does the same job)

**Glucose sweets:** The high sugar hit glucose sweets provide can help keep off a craving in the short term, in the UK these are easily available either from health stores or as Lucozade sweets.

**Valerian root:** This can help calm you down and relieve stress/anxiety. Again available from health food stores and chemists. A popular branded version in the UK is 'Kalms'. I'd suggest you keep these on you for a few weeks after detoxing as well.

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Remember, only take medications as directed on the packets, if in doubt ask a pharmacist for more advice.

#### Overdose risks

It's important to remember that **even a short break in use** can increase the risk of an overdose if you return to using heroin.

If for any reason you decide not to complete the detox, or to return to using after completing it then make sure that you don't return to the amounts you used before. Plus if you used to inject your heroin you should **smoke rather than inject** to help reduce the risk of an overdose.



## What's your score? Worker notes

#### **Expectations and preparation**

The medications mentioned in the handout can help take the edge off some of the more annoying symptoms of withdrawal, but they won't take them away totally. It's important to explain to people that heroin withdrawal is a 'process' and that the discomfort is part of that process, but it **will** pass.

**Sleep:** Often people will increase their stress levels by worrying that they get no sleep during withdrawal, it's far easier for people when they plan for this and find things to distract themselves for a few days. I often suggest people get themselves new games or DVDs if they can. If people are using reading as a distraction it's a good idea to stick to magazines or books with short chapters. People will sleep, although to them it may seem they haven't, people coming off heroin are the masters of the power nap.

**Exercise:** Withdrawal symptoms and duration can be reduced with exercise, if people go for walks (avoiding routes that take them past dealers) or use exercise equipment they may have. Remember that exercise equipment can be as simple as a couple of 4 litre milk bottles full of water.

**Support networks:** Everything gets easier with support, if friends or relatives know someone has been using heroin then they may be happy to help them quit. Avoid getting support from people

People will get some sleep, although to them it may seem they haven't, people coming off heroin are the masters of the power nap.

whose idea of helping is to just tell you everything wrong you've ever done though, no one needs that when they are withdrawing. If someone is in contact with a drug service or other formal support network they should be encouraged to check in, even a quick chat can help someone maintain motivation

**Complementary therapies:** Some drug services include acupuncture and other complementary therapies. While there is some discussion over how 'evidence based' these therapies are they do seem to help. Even if the only real effect is placebo this is still some time out of a day having a positive experience and pampering. When you've been awake for three days straight this kind of thing really helps.



## **Using the handout**

#### The numbered boxes

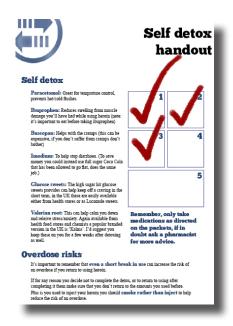
Although just a simple motivational mind trick, I've always found the boxes are a very useful part of this self detox tool. The basic idea is that someone planning to stop using heroin sticks the page to the back of their front door, and each day they mark off a box

with a big red tick. That way when someone is about to leave the house to go and buy heroin it might help them to pause, just enough, to change their mind (every little helps).

#### The medications

All the medications on this handout are available in the UK over the counter (ie not on prescription). Remember though that it's important to make it clear to people that any medication should only ever be taken in the doses recommended on the packets.

If someone is already taking other medication, or they have other health concerns it's a good idea for them to consult a pharmacist before starting this detox.



**Paracetamol:** When reducing opiates the body's temperature rises, after a certain point people lose their ability to correctly regulate this. Like the flu this will make someone feel like they are cold when in fact they are very hot. Paracetamol will help reduce the body temperature by a couple of degrees, this may mean that people still feel hot but they won't be going hot then cold every few minutes.

**Ibuprofen:** Someone using heroin is using a major pain killer, because of this they may not notice small amounts of muscle damage. As a result when you stop using you'll get extra aches and pains, Ibuprofen helps reduce swelling around this damage. It's important to let the person know they need to eat if they are going to take Ibuprofen as it can be harsh on the stomach.

**Buscopan:** Helps by reducing the discomfort from stomach cramps, however because it can be expensive it should only be bought if cramps are causing someone problems.



**Imodium:** When people stop using opiates they also stop having the constipating effect from them. Imodium will stop any diarrhoea as long as it's taken as recommended. Alternatively you can use full sugar Coca Cola that has been allowed to go flat as this also prevents diarrhoea. You can make cola go flat fast by adding a spoon of sugar to it, be warned though, if you do this you need to allow room in the glass for it to fizz

**Glucose sweets:** Keeping glucose sweets with you will help with cravings, if you get a craving give it a sugar hit rather than using the drugs. This is only a short term solution but if it helps someone break the cycle of craving leading directly to heroin use it's worth using. In the UK you can get glucose sweets from most chemists, some stores also sell a branded version by Lucozade.

**Valerian Root:** Valerian root is a herbal relaxant that helps relieve stress and can aid sleep. Keeping these around for a few weeks after stopping heroin use can really help with difficult moments. In the UK a major well known brand containing varerian root is called Kalms, people can however buy unbranded versions in most health food stores or chemists.

#### **Overdose risks**

One of the most important things to remember with any attempted detox is the risk of an opiate overdose. Methadone or Buprenorphine (branded names for buprenorphine are Subutex/Suboxone) prescribing does have a slight level of protection from overdose that self detox doesn't. People who have a history of overdoses should really consider substitute prescribing over a self detox (although personal choice or other factors may prevent this option).

For a regular heroin user any break can result in a reduced tolerance to the effects of the drug, it's really important for people to understand this **before starting** this kind of detox.

There are of course ways to limit the overdose risk, if for any reason someone goes back to heroin either during or after starting the quitting process they should use the smallest amount possible. Injecting heroin also greatly increases the chance of something going wrong so people should be encouraged to **smoke rather than inject**. Any staff working in drug services should be able to recommend effective ways to smoke as part of a route transition as this kind of advice increases the likelihood that someone will adopt this safer route of use.



## After the detox

#### Thoughts, feelings, aches and pains

Heroin is an amazing painkiller, both physically and emotionally. As a result there may be many things people who have just given it up have to deal with.

**Physical pain:** The whole time someone uses heroin they are benefitting from it's pain relief, so any small aches and pains that make the rest of us sit a certain way etc are ignored, making the damage worse. It's not unusual for someone to come off heroin and realise they are in pain most of the time. A good doctor who understands this can be the best person to talk to to help prevent a pain related relapse/lapse.

**Emotional pain:** People start using heroin for many reasons, unfortunately some of these include a need to avoid thinking about painful aspects of life or life experience. Add to this some of the things that happen to someone who has been using heroin and you have an emotional time waiting for people who quit using. Even people who have other reasons for using heroin are sometimes side swiped by the emotions they get when they stop using. It's important to both understand that **this is normal** and it will be easier as time goes on. Engaging with support networks can really help with this.

**Colds and flu:** I've yet to meet someone who has stopped using heroin who doesn't complain of getting more colds "I never got a cold when I was using". Well in reality they probably got lots of colds, but as the symptoms of withdrawal are almost the same they go unnoticed, plus you have to remember that heroin also suppresses the cough reflex

#### **Continued support**

As many people will tell you getting off heroin is only a small part of the problem, staying off is much harder. Working out the support networks someone has can really help keep them from relapsing back into old patterns of use. Think about:

- Friends
- Family
- Workers at drug services
- Other emotional support services (bereavement etc)
- 12 Step groups
- Rehabs
- Music and films



### **More resources**

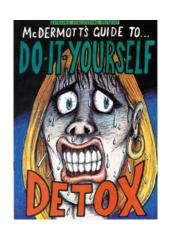
#### **Supporting materials**

#### **McDermott's guide to DIY detox:**

One of the great booklets in the McDermott series. Includes information on how to come off a range of drugs. Includes great tips on how to maximise success.

This and other Lifeline publications are now available through Exchange Supplies.

#### www.exchangesupplies.org





#### **Narcotics Anonymous:**

Provide great peer led support and have meetings all over the country, each meeting has its own unique personality dependant on the people attending.

NA has the advantage that it can introduce you to a new support network that doesn't knock off work at 5pm.

#### www.ukna.org

#### **Harm Reduction Works:**

HRW have produced a number of resources that are useful for working with self detox. All are part of their OD campaign.

I would encourage any service that works with people who detox to take advantage of these resources, all HRW tools are free to people in England (small charge for people/services in other areas).

www.harmreductionworks.org.uk



#### **Self Detox Handout**

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If you are using this tool please let me know how it goes nigel@injectingadvice.com

Please also consider donating to the upkeep of the site. That way I can afford to keep producing these kinds of tools for working with injecting drug users. Any amount of money helps no matter how small.



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