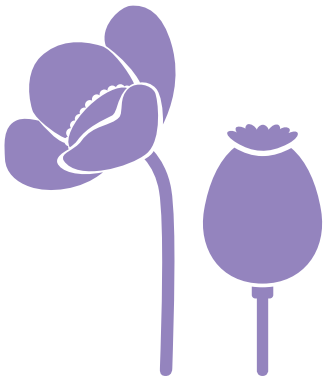


## Suzi's story

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I used heroin on and off for 15 years. I stopped on my own a couple of times, but always went back to using. This time was different though. I decided to try Suboxone, so I went into a residential unit for a week to do a supported withdrawal, then started on the Suboxone. It really seems to work for me. I've been on it for a couple of years now, and my life is in a good place. I reckon I'm ready to start coming off it, so I'm going to work with my doctor and slowly reduce the dose. Can't wait til I'm done – ready to try life opioid free for the first time in a long time!

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## Contacts

If you want to talk to someone about your own or someone else's alcohol or other drug use, you can get more information from:

ReGen  
1800 700 514 (Freecall)  
contact@regen.org.au  
www.regen.org.au

### **State-wide (Victoria):**

DirectLine (24/7 service offering counselling, information and referral)  
1800 888 236  
www.directline.org.au

Department of Health Website  
<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/alcohol-and-drugs>

### **Support & information for drug users from other drug using peers:**

Harm Reduction Victoria  
(03) 9329 1500  
www.hrvic.org.au

### **Support for family members or friends affected by a loved one's use:**

Family Drug Help  
1300 660 068  
www.familydrughelp.org.au

Thanks to ReGen's Consumer Consultants and Harm Reduction Victoria for their contributions to the development of ReGen's drug information leaflets.



# Opioids

# Getting

# support

## Getting started

### What happens if you think your opioid use is getting out of control? How do you know if it's a problem? What will people think if you ask for help?

It can be a bit overwhelming when thinking about changing your use, but there are a number of different options available, including just talking to someone about where you're at.

## Changing your opioid use

When you use opioids regularly, your body adapts and becomes used to their presence, developing a tolerance, meaning you need to take more to get the same effect. With regular use, dependence can develop, meaning you don't feel 'normal' without it. Dependence can be both physical and psychological.

If you want to reduce or stop your use, it can help to talk to your local alcohol and other drug service about the options available. For some people, their life is stable enough for them to withdraw and commit to abstinence, but others will need a pharmacotherapy like methadone and buprenorphine to help them get to where they want to be.

## Withdrawing from opioids

Withdrawal is what happens as your body adjusts to the absence (or reduced dosage) of opioids. Physical symptoms of withdrawal usually occur within a few hours after the last use, and peak between 24 and 48 hours. Most people will experience cravings in the form of physical discomfort, agitation and constant thoughts about using.

While it is normal to experience a range of withdrawal symptoms, these can be managed. Talk to your GP and your local alcohol and other drug service to find out how they can support you through the process.

## Withdrawal symptoms you may experience

There are common symptoms of opioid withdrawal, but everyone's experience is different. You may find you experience some, all or no symptoms, depending on the tolerance you have developed. Many people describe their withdrawal as similar to having the flu, with sweats, hot and cold flushes, goose-bumps, headaches, joint pain, muscle cramping and weakness. Other symptoms can include feeling restless and irritable, having trouble concentrating, muscle twitching and 'restless legs', an increased sensitivity to pain and strong cravings.

After 2-4 days, the physical symptoms should start to settle down and should disappear within a couple of weeks. Some people find that they continue to feel tired, irritable and have trouble sleeping for longer.

The psychological symptoms of withdrawal can last longer and can be more difficult to deal with. Some people experience cravings for some months after their physical symptoms have disappeared, and it is often the difficulty of this adjustment that puts people at risk of relapse after completing their withdrawal.

It's important to be aware that if you haven't used for a while, your tolerance will have decreased. If you do have a lapse and decide to use, you will need less gear to feel the same effect. If you use the same amount that you used to, you increase your risk of overdose.

## Tips for getting through withdrawal

There are a number of things you can do to support yourself through the withdrawal process:

### Plan ahead

- While it can be tempting to start withdrawal as soon as you feel the urge to change, most people find they are more successful if they take the time to plan their withdrawal before they begin. Which withdrawal option would work best for you? When is a good time to do it? What supports will you need? What things in your life will you need to cancel/reorganise?

## Look after yourself

- If you experience nausea or stomach pain during withdrawal, try avoiding greasy, fried food that may make you feel worse. Stick to light meals & snacks that will be easier for your body to digest.
- Stay hydrated – drink lots of water and juice, but avoid sugary drinks, caffeine and alcohol.
- Accept that sleep might be more difficult than normal – doing some gentle exercise during the day and then some relaxation exercises before bed can help you to wind down and feel tired enough to sleep. Your doctor may also be able to provide medication or suggest herbal remedies.
- Talk to your doctor about medications and supplements that can help you through the process, including vitamins & minerals like magnesium (which can help relieve muscle cramps and 'restless legs').
- Go easy on yourself! Most people have good days and bad days during withdrawal. Expect to feel strong cravings at times, as well as mood swings, feeling overwhelmed and feeling like it's all just too hard. Try and surround yourself with people who understand what you're trying to do and who will be encouraging and supportive.

## What comes after withdrawal?

Withdrawal is an essential part of the process but, on its own is no guarantee of ongoing success. Changing your thought processes and how you respond to different situations takes longer.

The more work you do on developing your skills to build on the changes you've made, and the stronger your support network is, the better you'll be at coping with the various challenges you'll face. Your alcohol and other drug worker will be able to help you identify the supports you already have in place and what you can do to provide yourself with the best chance of achieving your goals.