



# Spotting Alcohol Withdrawal in Jail Inmates

**Officers need to be on the lookout for symptoms of withdrawal that indicate a need for medical intervention**



*An inmate booked in 3 days ago is pacing all night and acting erratically. He hasn't slept at all and seems agitated. Should you be concerned?*

Inmates brought into a jail from the street are suddenly cut off from their usual substance supply. This can lead to some dangerous situations that need quick medical intervention. Alcohol and drug withdrawal is an everyday fact of life for this population. Although all substance withdrawal can turn nasty, alcohol withdrawal has an increase potential to be life-threatening and, therefore, a greater need for medical attention. How do you know when to seek a medical evaluation for an oddly acting inmate?

Inmates are not always honest about their alcohol and drug habits on intake. Fear of criminal charges and lack of trust contribute to under-reporting substance use. Without honest information, health care staff may not detect a need for withdrawal monitoring. Officers therefore need to be on the lookout for symptoms of withdrawal that indicate a need for medical intervention.

According to a jail medical expert, [Jeff Keller, MD](#), the three primary indications of early alcohol withdrawal are:

1. Pacing;
2. Sleeplessness, and
3. Elevated heart rate

In addition, withdrawing individuals are not interested in eating and often refuse meals. If not caught early and treated with benzodiazepines (Valium, Librium), alcohol withdrawal can rapidly spiral into delirium tremens and death.

Safety is a primary concern when an inmate is at high risk of alcohol withdrawal. Seizures can occur, as well as disorientation that can lead to falls.

Withdrawing patients entering into delirium tremens (DTs) may appear psychotic to even experienced health professionals. Yet, treatment for these two conditions are very different and, left untreated, DT's end in death. If you see an inmate abruptly start exhibiting signs of being disoriented and having visual hallucinations, do not delay in seeking medical evaluation. The high rate of alcohol use in the jail population should result in a high suspicion of DT's in this situation.