

A close-up photograph of two women smiling warmly at the camera. The woman on the left has dark, curly hair and is wearing a yellow top. The woman on the right has long, dark hair and is wearing a light blue polka-dot top. They are outdoors with a blurred green background.

## **WHAT TO EXPECT DURING DETOX**

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If you've developed a dependence on drugs or alcohol, the first step of addiction treatment will be detoxification. Detox ends the physical dependence on a substance so that brain function can begin to return to normal and you can focus on getting the treatment you need to help you recover from the addiction.

You've probably heard a detox horror story or two, but the truth is, detox doesn't have to be a nightmare. Here, we look at the detox process, how professional detox improves comfort and safety and what to expect during detox.

**WHAT, EXACTLY, IS DETOX?**



**Understanding what occurs in the brain during detox can help you know what to expect during the detox process.**

Drugs and alcohol are psychoactive substances, which means that they affect your mental state by changing the chemical function of the brain. Brain chemicals, or neurotransmitters, affected by drugs and alcohol include dopamine, serotonin, GABA, glutamate and norepinephrine.

Different drugs produce different effects on neurotransmitters. For example, alcohol, which is a depressant, increases the activity of GABA, which is responsible for feelings of calm and well-being, and decreases the activity of glutamate, which is responsible for feelings of excitability.

The brain doesn't take kindly to these changes at first, and it tries to normalize by altering its chemical function. In the case of chronic alcohol abuse, the brain decreases the activity of GABA and increases the activity of glutamate in an attempt to compensate for the changes produced by alcohol.



As the brain compensates, tolerance develops. Tolerance means that you need increasingly larger doses of drugs or alcohol to get the desired effects. As you increase the dosage, the brain continues to compensate, but at some point, it may reach a tipping point where it begins to operate more “normally” when drugs are present. The brain begins to need the drug to function properly. This is dependence.

During detox, the drug is withheld so that all traces can leave the body and normal brain function can rebound. Neurotransmitters that were suppressed now flood the brain, and those that were increased are now reduced again. This resurgence of normal brain activity causes the onset of physical withdrawal symptoms, which vary depending on the drug and the neurotransmitters involved.





## Unsupported Detox vs. Professional Detox

Many people who try to detox on their own turn back to drugs or alcohol very quickly simply to end the discomfort of the withdrawal symptoms. But it's not just your comfort that's at stake during unsupported detox. Serious medical complications can occur suddenly during withdrawal, putting your health and safety at risk. It's never a good idea to detox on your own.

Professional detox is supervised by medical and mental health professionals who administer medication as needed to reduce the severity of withdrawal symptoms and address potentially dangerous conditions. High-quality detox centers offer comfortable, relaxing facilities that promote healing and well-being. They provide healthy food and emotional and psychological support to ensure the highest possible level of safety and comfort during detox.



**WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS  
ASSOCIATED WITH DETOX**



Different drugs produce different withdrawal symptoms, but not everyone experiences all of the possible symptoms of withdrawal from any particular drug. The symptoms that do occur can range in intensity from mild to severe, and they can last anywhere from a few days to a few weeks.

The severity and length of withdrawal depends on a number of factors, including how much of the drug is in your system at the time of detox, the length and severity of your dependence, your general physical and mental health and your unique biology and genetics.

It's important to have an idea about what types of symptoms you'll encounter during withdrawal so that you'll know what to expect in detox.

## Alcohol

Alcohol produces withdrawal symptoms that include:

- Irritability
- Nausea
- Anxiety
- Reduced appetite
- Insomnia

Severe alcohol withdrawal includes symptoms like:

- Tremors
- Elevated heart function
- Hallucinations
- Seizures

Severe alcohol withdrawal can be fatal. Medications used to treat withdrawal symptoms and prevent dangerous shifts in body function include benzodiazepines, anticonvulsants and antipsychotics.





## Opioids

Opioids include heroin and prescription painkillers like OxyContin, Vicodin and Fentanyl. Opioids produce flu-like withdrawal symptoms, including:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Abdominal cramps
- Diarrhea
- Hot and cold sweats
- Muscle aches
- Anxiety

While opioid withdrawal isn't typically life-threatening, dehydration from vomiting and diarrhea may occur, which can be dangerous. Opioid withdrawal can be excruciating, but medications like buprenorphine, methadone and clonidine can effectively treat these symptoms to prevent unnecessary suffering.

## Stimulants

Central nervous system stimulants like cocaine, meth and prescription drugs like Adderall or Ritalin cause withdrawal symptoms such as:

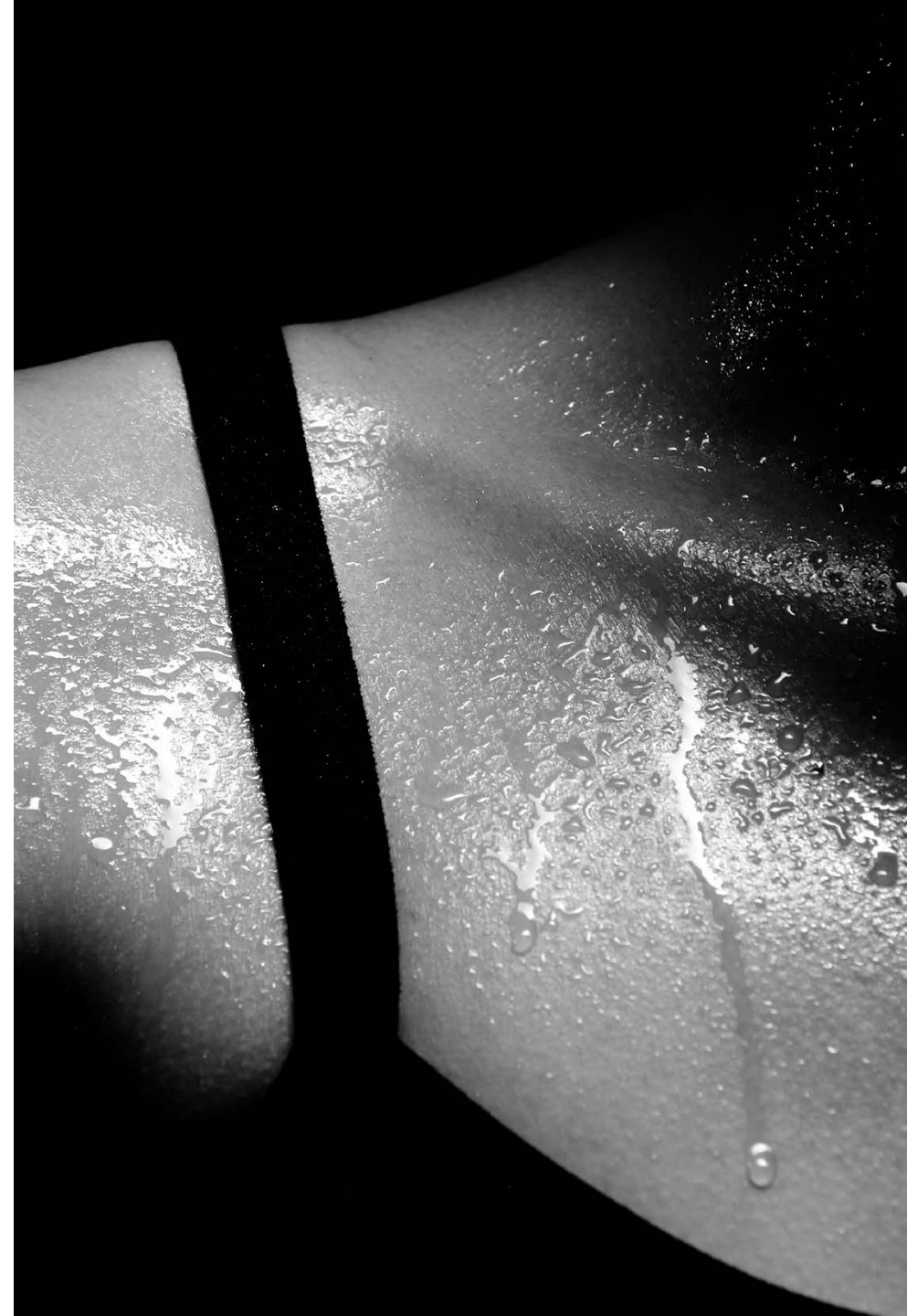
- Irritability
- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- Anxiety and deep depression

While no medications have been approved to treat stimulant withdrawal, antidepressants may be prescribed to treat the depression that often occurs.

## Sedatives

Valium, Xanax, Klonopin and other benzodiazepines produce withdrawal symptoms like sweating, tremors, anxiety and nausea. In some cases, dangerous increases in heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature may occur, and these can be fatal.

Since no medications have been proven effective for treating benzodiazepine withdrawal, detox typically involves tapering off the doses over several weeks to prevent the onset of withdrawal altogether.





## Cravings During Detox

One withdrawal symptom that all psychoactive substances have in common is cravings. Drug cravings can be extremely intense, and while they may subside considerably by the end of the detox process, most people will experience cravings for weeks or months after detox. Some people may experience cravings for years after quitting. While there are some medications that can help reduce cravings, therapy is essential for helping individuals learn essential skills and strategies for coping with them.

An aerial photograph of a vast valley. In the foreground, there are rolling green hills with a winding dirt path. The middle ground shows a large city with a dense grid of buildings and a major highway interchange. The background features a range of blue mountains under a clear sky. A white semi-transparent box is overlaid on the lower-left portion of the image, containing the text.

**WHAT TO EXPECT  
FROM A PROFESSIONAL  
DETOX PROGRAM**



**Riverside, California, offers a number of detox programs, but not all detox centers are created equal.**

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a high-quality detox program will consist of three components: evaluation, stabilization and fostering readiness for treatment.<sup>1</sup>

### **Evaluation**

A full evaluation is performed upon being admitted to a detox program. During the evaluation, staff will test for the presence of drugs or alcohol in the bloodstream and measure the concentration. Medical and mental health screenings identify any co-occurring physical or mental illnesses. A variety of assessments and interviews give staff a comprehensive look at the individual's psychological state, overall health and social situation.

## Stabilization

Stabilization is the process of seeing the individual through withdrawal to a medically and mentally stable, fully supported, drug- or alcohol-free state. This is achieved through medication, counseling, support and—in high-quality detox programs—complementary therapies like acupuncture, massage and restorative yoga.

## Fostering Readiness for Treatment

Detox is only the first step in addressing an addiction to drugs or alcohol. Without following it up with a high-quality treatment program, the chances of relapse are very high. During detox, your team of care providers will work with you to develop a treatment plan that will help you maintain abstinence once the detox process is complete.





## Levels of Medical Detox

The American Society of Addiction Medicine identifies five levels of care for detox.<sup>2</sup> A variety of criteria are used to place an individual in the appropriate level of care.

### **Level I-D is Ambulatory Detoxification Without Extended Onsite Monitoring.**

This translates to outpatient detox, which takes place through a doctor's office or home health agency. The patient is monitored at various intervals during detox.

### **Level II-D is Ambulatory Detoxification With Extended Onsite Monitoring.**

This level of detox involves programs like day hospital service, where detox is monitored by licensed nurses.

### **Level III.2-D is Clinically Managed Residential Detoxification.**

This inpatient care level doesn't involve medical supervision or medication, but instead focuses on around-the-clock peer and social support.

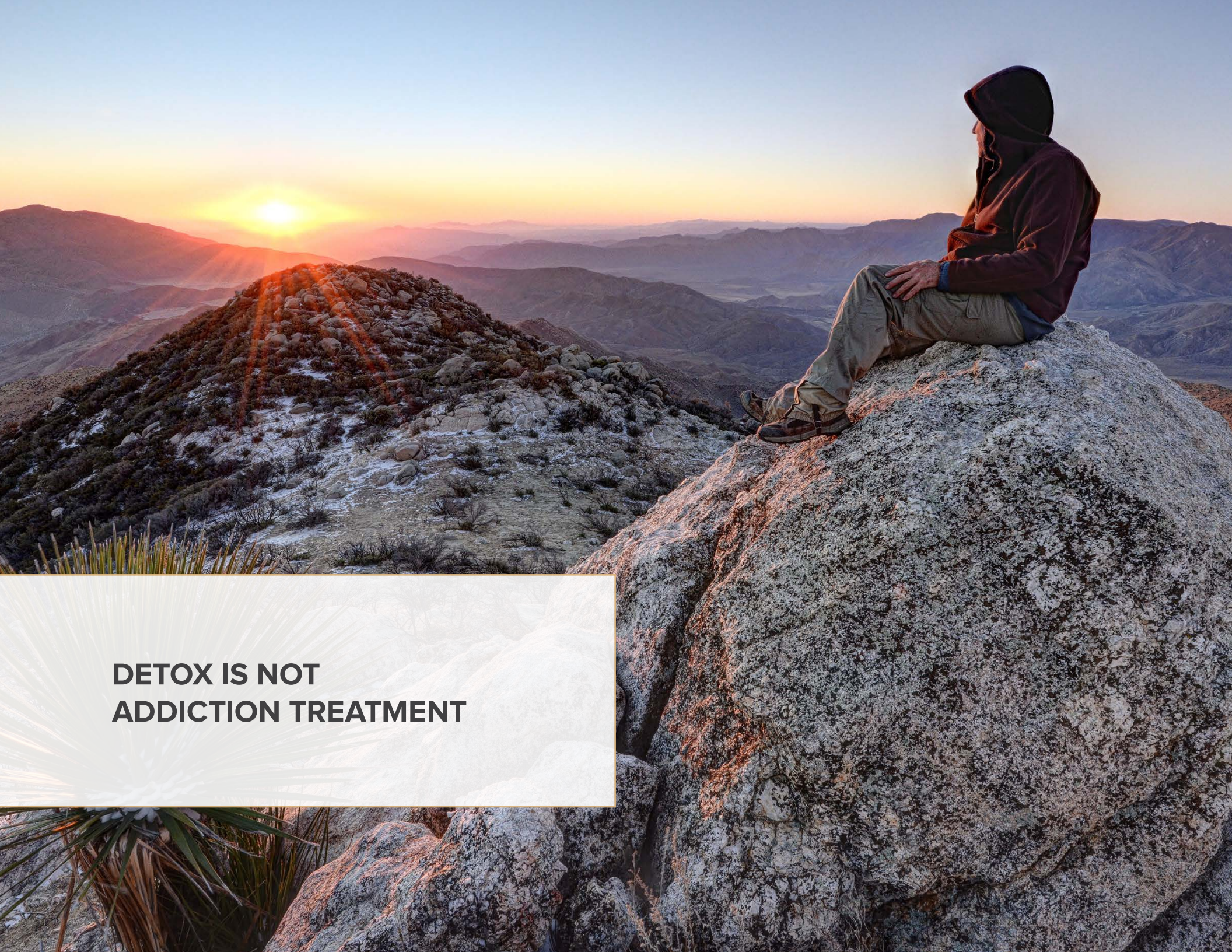
### **Level III.7-D is Medically Monitored Inpatient Detoxification.**

This can take place at a free-standing detox center or as part of a comprehensive inpatient rehab program. Here, detox is supervised by medical professionals who can administer medication as needed to reduce symptoms and treat medical emergencies.

### **Level IV-D is Medically Managed Intensive Inpatient Detoxification.**

This level of care takes place in an acute-care hospital setting where care is provided around the clock.



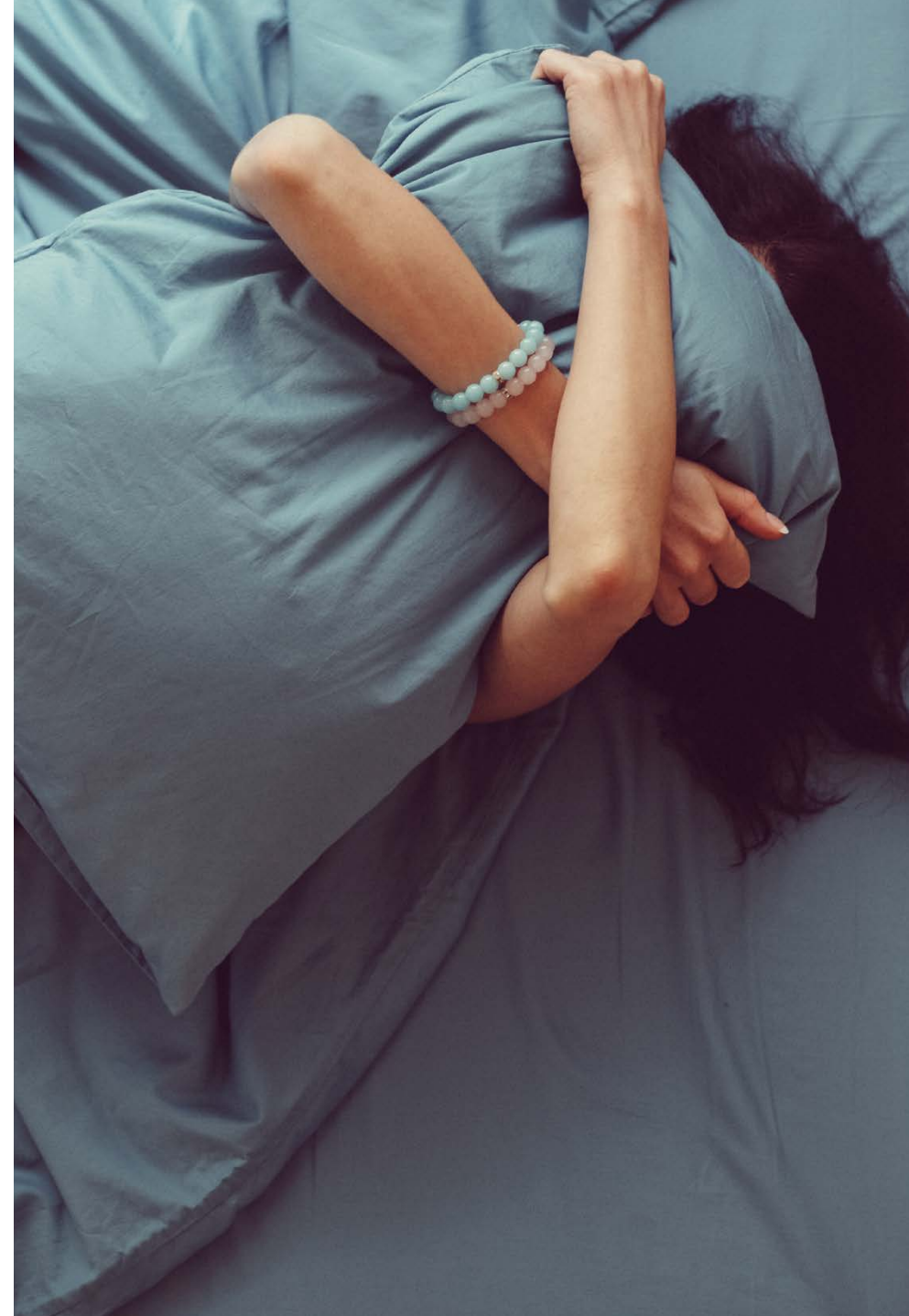


**DETOX IS NOT  
ADDICTION TREATMENT**

According to the Principles of Effective Treatment outlined by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, detox alone does very little to treat an addiction—addiction is far more complex than dependence.<sup>3</sup> Willpower and good intentions are rarely enough to end an addiction, which almost always requires professional help to overcome for the long-term.

Addiction is characterized by compulsive drug or alcohol use despite the negative consequences it causes. People who are addicted have lost control over how much and for how long they use. A variety of issues almost always underlie an addiction, often including mental illness, chronic stress and a history of trauma.

Addiction is the result of changes in the structures and chemical functions in the learning, memory and reward centers of the brain. These complex changes lead the brain to equate liking a drug to needing it for survival. Intense cravings result, driven by the same mechanisms that lead us to eat food and procreate in order to survive.





These brain changes also affect your thoughts and actions. Dysfunctional patterns of thinking develop, and behaviors become more and more self-destructive. This leads to a multitude of problems in life, such as relationship, financial, legal, medical and mental health problems. Often, these problems in turn cause stress and other negative emotions that further perpetuate and reinforce the addiction.

A high-quality addiction treatment program will take a holistic approach to treatment that addresses issues of body, mind and spirit for whole-person healing. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration stresses that there is no single pathway to recovery.<sup>4</sup> No one treatment works for every person who suffers from addiction. A holistic program will offer a variety of both traditional “talk” therapies and complementary therapies like art or nature therapy.

**Through these therapies, people in recovery:**

- Develop a toolkit of skills and strategies to cope with stress, cravings and other triggers
- Identify dysfunctional thought and behavior patterns and learn new, healthier ways of thinking and behaving
- Address the various issues underlying the substance abuse
- Address any co-occurring mental illnesses and medical problems
- Repair relationships damaged by the addiction and restore function to the household
- Find purpose and meaning in a life without drugs or alcohol
- Research shows that treatment works for most people who engage with their treatment plan.





**DETOX AND TREATMENT  
HELP END DEPENDENCE AND  
ADDICTION FOR GOOD**



Detox doesn't have to be miserable. Quite the opposite. It can, in fact, be a time of valuable self-reflection, motivation building, and well-being. Detox ends your physical dependence on drugs or alcohol, while treatment helps you end your drug abuse and improve your quality of life on many fronts. Together, detox followed by adequate time in treatment can help you end, once and for all, even a severe drug or alcohol addiction.



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