

2.21 ALCOHOL WITHDRAWAL

EMSAC FEBRUARY 2026

General Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obtain an alcohol withdrawal history from patients including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time since last alcohol drink? How much and how often they drink alcohol? Have they ever experienced alcohol withdrawal symptoms before? Alcohol withdrawal seizures? Have they used any other substances? Reason they stopped drinking (e.g. trying to quit, recent illness, limited mobility, etc) Consider alternative diagnoses, including infection, trauma or opioid withdrawal
BLS Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the Brief Alcohol Withdrawal Scale (BAWS) – see Appendix 1 Determine BAWS score and request ALS for BAWS score ≥ 3
ALS Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BAWS score ≥ 3: administer 2.5 mg IV midazolam X1. Reassess BAWS score after 5 minutes and if ≥ 3 and administer additional dose of midazolam (max dose 5mg IV). If midazolam administered document Initial and secondary BAWS score
Comments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Early identification and intervention of alcohol withdrawal are critical to prevent progression to life-threatening complications Patients with concern for alcohol withdrawal are not appropriate for the sobering center Initial alcohol withdrawal signs/symptoms typically occur 6-8 hours after last drink. Withdrawal seizures typically occur 12-48 hours after last drink. If patient has a seizure, continue to follow seizure protocol. Delirium Tremens (DTs) is a severe form of alcohol withdrawal that can be life-threatening if not treated properly. DTs symptoms begin 48 hours after the last drink and are most severe 4-5 days after last drink.

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Appendix 1: Brief Alcohol Withdrawal Scale (BAWS)

Symptom	0 None	1 Mild	2 Moderate	3 Severe	Subtotal
Tremor	No Tremor	Not visible, but can be felt	Moderate, with arms extended	At rest, without arms extended	/3
Diaphoresis/Sweats	No sweats	Mild, Barely visible	Beads of sweat	Drenching sweats	/3
Agitation (Richmond Agitation Sedation Scale)	RASS=0 Alert and Calm	RASS=+1 Restless, anxious, apprehensive, movement, not aggressive	RASS=2 Disorientation to time and place	Disorientation to person RASS=+3 or 4 Very agitated, combative or violent	/3
Confusion/Orientation	Orientation to person, place, time	Disorientated to time (e.g., by more than 2 days, wrong month, or wrong year) or to place (e.g., name of building, city, state) but not both	Disorientation to time and place	Disorientation to person	/3
Hallucinations (visual, auditory, tactile)	None	Mild (vague report, reality testing intact)	Moderate (more defined hallucinations)	Severe (obviously responding to internal stimuli, poor reality testing)	/3
				Total:	/15

Instructions to calculate score:

Rate each symptom in the left column (tremor, diaphoresis/sweats, agitation, confusion/orientation and hallucinations) as either: none (0 points), mild (1 point), moderate (2 points) or severe (3 points). Add the scores for these five (5) symptoms for a BAWS score.

Citation: Rastegar DA, Applewhite D, Alvanzo AAH, Welsh C, Niessen T, Chen ES. Development and implementation of an alcohol withdrawal protocol using a 5-item scale, the Brief Alcohol Withdrawal Scale (BAWS). Subst Abus. 2017 Oct-Dec;38(4):394-400. doi: 10.1080/08897077.2017.1354119. Epub 2017 Jul 12. PMID: 28699845.