

COWS Documentation Cheat Sheet

Reviewed by the BastionGPT Clinical Advisory Board · August 2026 · Reproduces no scale text or anchors

The COWS is an 11-item clinician-administered opioid-withdrawal scale totaling 0 to 48 (severe starts at 37, and no law sets any induction threshold). Defensible charting is a decision trace: components and times, the named protocol and its criterion, doses with clocks, serial response, and disposition.

Time-stamped total with components the number cannot stand alone
Do: exact clock time, total /48, all 11 component values in the flowsheet.
Pitfall: bare totals; items are unevenly weighted and ED inter-rater agreement on the category was only moderate.

Objective substrate vs report attribute, then score
Do: record measured pulse, observed sweating, pupils, tremor, restlessness, piloerection; note confounders excluded.
Pitfall: heat, exertion, stimulants, pain, allergy, or another withdrawal syndrome scored in.

Last use, with uncertainty fentanyl breaks elapsed-time rules
Do: substance, route, approximate time, plus methadone, XR-opioid, sedative, alcohol exposure.
Pitfall: charting an opioid-free interval as fact when the history is approximate.

Named protocol and criterion thresholds are conventions
Do: name the pathway + version/date and paraphrase its criterion; low-dose protocols have no gate, say so.
Pitfall: "COWS 12 required" charted as law; real protocols span at least 6 to at least 13.

Decision, dose, exact times trajectory needs a dose clock
Do: decision + rationale; medication, dose, route, administration time; serial scores with elapsed times.
Pitfall: "serial COWS per protocol" with no clock times anywhere.

Response and suspected PW a timed delta, not a verdict
Do: numerical rise from pre-dose baseline, elapsed minutes, new objective signs, differential, treatment, response.
Pitfall: one high post-dose score charted as precipitated withdrawal; definitions differ, use "suspected".

Disposition and safety net reviewers trace to the handoff
Do: observation status, naloxone, discharge or bridge medication, confirmed linkage, return precautions, follow-up owner.
Pitfall: an induction note that ends at the dose.

Before the note is signed

- ☐ Every assessment has a clock time and components
- ☐ Objective findings recorded; confounders addressed
- ☐ Last-use history charted with its uncertainty
- ☐ Protocol named with version; criterion paraphrased
- ☐ Doses carry exact administration times
- ☐ Any worsening charted as a timed delta with differential
- ☐ Disposition includes naloxone and follow-up owner

Drafting with AI

Give it the trace facts: times, totals with components, last-use history, the named protocol and criterion, doses and times, response.

"Draft COWS documentation: 09:10 score 10 deferred under our pathway, 10:00 score 13 criterion met, dosed 10:08, serial response, discharged with naloxone and next-day follow-up."

Never paste client-identifying information into consumer AI tools. BastionGPT is HIPAA-compliant with a signed BAA on every plan.

0 to 48
severe starts at 37

11 items
unevenly weighted

2 to 5 minutes
per administration

No legal threshold
protocols span 6 to 13

COWS Documentation Template

Copy or print for your practice · Adapt fields to your organization's, payer's and jurisdiction's documentation requirements. Contains no scale text.

Setting/unit: _____ Patient (initials): _____ Date: _____ Assessor and role: _____

Protocol (name + version/date): _____ Criterion (paraphrase / low-dose: no gate): _____

Assessment (repeat per timepoint)

Exact time · total ___/48 · all 11 component values in flowsheet · mode: in person / video (phone report is not an observed COWS)

Objective findings and attribution

Measured pulse · sweating · pupils in prevailing light · tremor · restlessness · piloerection · tearing · confounders considered and excluded

Last use and safety

Substance / route / time with uncertainty · fentanyl, methadone, XR-opioid, sedative, alcohol exposure · arousal, respiratory status, vitals, intoxication

Decision and medication

Criterion met or not · decision and rationale (initiate / defer / low-dose / observe / escalate) · drug, dose, route, exact administration time

Serial response

Time and total per reassessment with elapsed minutes from dose · suspected precipitated withdrawal as a timed delta: rise, new objective signs, differential, treatment, response

Disposition and follow-up

Observation / admission / discharge medications · naloxone provided · linkage confirmed or attempted · return precautions · follow-up owner and date

Clinician (name and credentials): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____