



Alcohol and Sensible Drinking

How much is too much?

One or two small drinks a day can help prevent coronary heart disease in men and women over 40 and women after the menopause. Many people however drink more than the recommended amounts of alcohol. It is thought that nearly one in three adults in the UK is risking their health by drinking more than the recommended daily amount of alcohol.

Current UK guidelines recommend that men don't drink more than three or four units of alcohol a day, and that women limit their intake to two or three units a day. You shouldn't save up units through the week and use them to binge at the weekend, and at least one day a week should be alcohol-free. If you do have an episode of heavy drinking abstaining from alcohol for 48 hours will help your body recover in the short-term.

Strength and units

The recommended maximum weekly alcohol consumption for a women is 14 units, and 21 units for a man. The recommended limits are lower for women than men because women's bodies contain less water than men. This means that a women of the same size and weight as a man will be affected more by the same amount of alcohol than a man. If a women drinks above her recommended levels she is also more likely to develop liver problems than a man. Listed are some examples of the alcohol content of a variety of common alcoholic drinks.

- One pint of strong lager (alcohol 5% vol) = 3 units
- One pint of standard strength lager (alcohol 3 - 3.5% vol) = 2 units
- One 275ml bottle of an alcopop (alcohol 5.5% vol) = 1.5 units
- One standard (175ml) glass of wine (alcohol 12% vol) = 2 units
- One measure (25ml) of a spirit strength drink = 1 unit

Alcohol dependence

People who drink frequently or have large binges can become addicted to alcohol. Doctors use a number of techniques to diagnose patients with drink problems. They may ask you how much and how often you drink and whether you have "blackouts". You may be asked if you have tried to cut down, whether you feel guilty about your drinking, or whether you have a drink in the morning.

According to the Institute of Alcohol Studies, a person is considered to be dependent on alcohol when they have experienced three or more of the following symptoms during a year.

- Difficulty controlling how much they drink, or difficulty stopping.
- Physical withdrawal symptoms, such as sweating, shaking and agitation when they try to reduce drinking.

- A strong urge to drink.
- A growing tolerance to alcohol - needing larger quantities to get the same effect,(that is a growing tolerance.)
- Neglect of their normal activities, work or domestic life, self care.
- Persistent drinking even though it is obviously causing harm.

Alcohol abuse, or problem drinking, happens when a person is not only dependent on alcohol, but is drinking enough to cause themselves actual physical or psychological harm.

Effects of alcohol in the short term.

A small amount of alcohol will relax you and make you feel less anxious. In increasing amounts it suppresses the part of your brain that controls judgement, resulting in a loss of inhibitions. It also affects your physical co-ordination, causing blurred vision, slurred speech and loss of balance. You may become more argumentative and more likely to make risky decisions. Drinking a very large amount at one time (binge drinking) can lead to unconsciousness, coma, and even death. Vomiting while unconscious can lead to death by asphyxiation.

Alcohol is involved in a large proportion of fatal road accidents, assaults and incidents of domestic violence. Remember not to drink and drive.

Effects of alcohol in the long-term

Alcohol can be a dangerous drug if not used within the UK guidelines. It can make existing diseases worse but can also cause:

- Cirrhosis of the liver and hepatitis
- Gastritis (inflammation of the stomach lining) or pancreatitis
- High blood pressure
- Certain types of cancer e.g. mouth and throat
- Damage to the brain
- Damage to the heart
- Nervous system problems e.g. fits
- Some vitamin deficiencies
- Social problems, loss of job, family disruption etc
- Impotence
- obesity
- sexual problems
- infertility
- muscle disease
- skin problems
- Relationship and other psychological problems.

Alcohol and pregnancy

Women who drink heavily during pregnancy are at risk of having babies with a condition called foetal alcohol syndrome. This can result in growth deficiencies, nervous system problems, lowered intelligence, and facial abnormalities in the child. They are also more likely to have babies of low birth weight. It is not clear that there is any “safe “ level of alcohol in pregnancy and current advice is to stop drinking alcohol altogether.

Psychological effects

The importance of these cannot be emphasised. Although alcohol initially makes people feel relaxed, long term excessive use cause anxiety and depression. It is also related to problems with sleeping, mood-swings, violence and suicide (about two-thirds of suicide attempts are thought to involve alcohol) Binge drinking can result in more “risky” sexual behaviour increasing vulnerability to sexual assault and unwanted pregnancy. With it's own set of risks.

Are you drinking too much?

Why not keep a “drinking diary”, noting how much alcohol you drink each week for a couple of weeks. It will reveal whether you are drinking within safe guidelines and help you identify the situations that you need to avoid to cut down your drinking.

How to cut down

- Go out later, so you start drinking later.
- Replace your “usual” drink with one containing less alcohol.
- Skip the “quick drink” at lunchtime or after work.
- Have at least two alcohol-free days a week.
- Do something other than going to the pub.
- Drink more slowly or have non-alcoholic drinks between alcoholic ones.
- Buy beers and wines with lower alcohol content, and keep a supply of non-alcoholic drinks at home.
- Set yourself a limit of, for example three to four units (men) or two to three (women) for any one occasion.
- Find other ways to relax.

Stopping drinking

If you are dependent on alcohol you may need more support to help you cut down. Go and see your GP who can refer you to a specialist team who will help you. Cutting down may not be enough if you are alcohol dependent. Confidential advice and support is available through your GP, and may involve a community alcohol team or specialist consultant care. Alcohol Concern and Alcoholics Anonymous also offer support to people dependent on alcohol and their families. You can arrange to see them yourself

If someone drinks very heavily and suddenly stops they can become unwell. Withdrawal symptoms include headaches, nausea, sweating, and tremors. Sometimes more serious symptoms like confusion, paranoia, and having fits or hallucinations can occur.

To prevent withdrawal symptoms, a chronic heavy drinker may be prescribed medication for a few days after stopping drinking by a doctor.

Further information

Alcohol Concern

www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous

0845 769 7555

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk