

Alcohol support

If you drink too much for too long, it can seriously harm your health.

Long-term over-consumption of alcohol puts you at raised risk of a variety of health problems. You don't have to be a binge drinker or feel that you have an alcohol problem to regularly drink more than your recommended daily allowance (RDA).

Long-term health problems

Not only can drinkers fail to remember what went on during a heavy session, but persistent heavy drinkers can develop long-term memory problems and dementia-like symptoms

Cancer

After smoking, drinking alcohol is the second biggest risk factor for cancers of the mouth and throat. Drinking and smoking together carries the highest risk of all. People who develop cirrhosis of the liver (often caused by too much alcohol) can develop liver cancer. Women who drink more than three drinks a day increase their risk of breast cancer.

Mental health problems

There is a link between drinking too much alcohol and mental health problems such as depression. Heavy long-term drinking can also risk problems with memory loss.

Heart disease

In men over 40 and women past the menopause, small amounts of alcohol (a couple of drinks a day) may reduce the risk of heart disease. For everyone else, too much alcohol is likely to cause weight gain, prevent proper exercise and be a cause of heart disease.

Stroke

Drinking more than the sensible limit dramatically increases the risk of having a stroke. A 20-year study of 6,000 Scottish men found that those who drank more than five units a day were twice as likely to die from a stroke compared with non-drinkers.

Strokes are caused either by blood clots clogging arteries in the brain (ischaemic stroke) or by blood vessels bursting and leaking into the brain (haemorrhagic stroke). A very heavy session (more than eight units for men, six for women) causes dehydration and makes the blood thicker and more likely to form clots in the brain and elsewhere.

Prolonged heavy use of alcohol also raises blood pressure and can be another cause of stroke.

Thread veins and brittle nails

Alcoholic drinks contain lots and lots of calories so weight gain among people who don't drink sensibly is common. Alcohol affects the circulation by expanding blood vessels.

This causes thread veins, often on the face, and purple, bulbous 'drinker's nose'. Heavy drinkers usually don't eat properly and too much alcohol stops the body absorbing the nutrients it needs. This leads to poor skin and brittle hair and nails.

Diabetes

Regular heavy drinkers are often overweight and, as with all overweight people, can go on to develop diabetes. Though manageable, people with diabetes don't live as long and have to eat restricted diets and take medicines daily or inject themselves with insulin.

Sexual health problems

Too much alcohol shrinks genitals and lowers fertility. Being drunk can loosen inhibitions and affect your judgement. This can make you less likely to use a condom or other protection properly (or at all) and so increase the risk of a sexually transmitted infection or unintended pregnancy.

Pancreatitis

Long-term heavy drinkers can develop this painful condition. The pancreas makes insulin and other substances needed to properly digest food. If left untreated, pancreatitis causes malnutrition and can lead to diabetes. In the UK, around 500 people a year die of alcohol-related pancreatitis. Other digestive problems caused by drinking too much include acid reflux – where stomach acid burns your throat. Alcohol can also contribute to developing a peptic ulcer – a painful, open sore in your stomach lining. Liver disease has traditionally affected drinkers in middle age. Now figures show there has been an eight-fold increase in the disease in men aged between 35 and 44. You don't need to be an alcoholic to be affected, regular drinking can put you at risk.

Memory problems

Not only can people fail to remember what went on during a heavy session, persistent heavy drinkers can develop memory loss problems. A dementia-like illness called Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome is caused by vitamin B1 deficiency. This is caused by poor absorption and storage of thiamine brought on by too much alcohol over too long a period.

Fertility

There is a link between drinking and fertility, although exactly how alcohol makes women less fertile isn't understood clearly. It isn't just female fertility that's affected by alcohol. Excessive alcohol lowers testosterone levels and sperm quality and quantity in men. It can also reduce libido, and cause impotence. If a man drinks heavily it can really reduce a couple's chances of conceiving. However, if you reduce what you drink, these effects can be quickly reversed.

Alcohol and the male physique

The days when having a large stomach was a sign of affluence and social standing are now long gone. Today most men realise that if they want the pulling power of a football star, it pays not to have the physique of a darts player.

For some men, beer bellies are just the beginning of the problem. Expanding love handles and the dreaded 'moobs' (aka man boobs) can cause even more embarrassment. And while they may be the butt of endless pub jokes, it's less funny when this extra weight begins to affect your health

WHY DO I DRINK?

Like it or not, you might well recognise one of these drinking 'characters'...

When you pour a glass of wine or ping the cap off a beer, do you ever think about what your motivation is?

Whether reaching for the corkscrew after a hard day at work or having a few beers in front of the football, there are certain situations that tend to go hand in hand with a drink.

Which of these characters best reflects your reasons for drinking alcohol?

The stress-head

You've done a solid eight hours in the office, up against deadlines, a demanding boss and fussy clients. And let's not even start about your horrendous commute there and back. When you fall in the front door, blood pressure sky high, a relaxing drink is like water in the desert to you.

Or perhaps you've been running around after children since the crack of dawn. Spending the day endlessly cooking, cleaning, changing nappies and breaking up squabbles has left you frazzled - and thirsty. The second bed-time arrives and out comes the wine.

Sound familiar? Figures from a recent NHS poll show that the reason almost half (42%) of drinkers drink is to unwind after a stressful day.

Cutting back

Alcohol may help you relax for an hour or two. But it can increase your [stress levels](#) overall. Alcohol is a depressant, which means that it slows down the brain and the central nervous system's processes. At first this can make you more relaxed and less wound up, but if you drink too much it can end up making you feel depressed, anxious – and more stressed.

There are lots of other things you can do to unwind. Hitting the gym or heading to a yoga class are some of the best. Or you could simply break into a box set you've always fancied, or phone a friend and share your frustrations.

The bonus

You'll free yourself from the vicious cycle of 'stress – alcohol – more stress'. Sticking within the recommended guidelines that men shouldn't drink more than 3-4 units a day (equivalent to a pint and a half of 4% beer) and women no more than 2-3 units (equivalent to a 175ml glass of 13% wine) means you'll feel much healthier overall.

Alcohol can also reduce the quality of your [sleep](#) so cutting back will also mean more rest, and you'll be fighting fit to face the stresses of the day. And of course you'll be cutting down your risk of serious health issues including [cancer](#), [liver disease](#) and [mental health](#) problems.

The dinner time guzzler

For you, dinner isn't complete without a glass of wine or two.

It all starts with the preparation. You love playing chef for family and friends, and a glass of wine while you cook up a storm is all part of the fun. But often that turns into two or three and oops...half the bottle's gone before you even make it to the table. Then the rest goes during the meal. And thanks to being so 'relaxed' your beautiful dinner might end up a bit on the burned side too...

Cutting back

Why not save the alcohol until you sit down to eat? That way you'll make sure your meal is perfect, and you'll stay hydrated while slaving over your hot stove. You'll also be alert for dinner time conversation.

If you've got some wine left over, no need to finish the bottle. Put the last bits in an ice cube tray, freeze them and use them in your cooking next time – wine can be great for sauces, marinades and gravy.

The bonus

Not drinking so much means fewer [calories](#) (did you know there are about 130 calories in a medium 175ml glass of wine? That's the same as half a chocolate bar). So you can have some extra dessert, guilt-free. What could be better?

The sports fan

You love football. Rugby. Maybe a bit of cricket. Your perfect weekend is watching all the big matches on TV. Accompanied by a beer or two or three...

Cutting back

The last thing you want to do is miss the full euphoria of a screamer of a goal because you've drunk a bit too much. Often, you'll be watching sport for a good couple of hours at least. So the key is to stick to the sensible limits and pace yourself. Having a soft drink for every alcoholic one will slow you down, as will eating – so get plenty of healthy snacks in. You could try some low alcohol beer too.

The bonus

Did you know for every unit of alcohol you drink, you produce an extra 80ml of urine (1)? Cut down and you won't need to visit the bathroom so much – risking missing some key action.

Alcohol is also loaded with calories (there are up to 260 calories in a pint of premium 5% lager) so cutting back on the amount of alcohol you drink before, during and after the game all helps to keep your calorie consumption in check.

The 'relax, it's the weekend!' drinker

Who doesn't love it when Friday night finally rolls around? After a hard week, you can flop down on the sofa and look forward to a couple of days off. It's time to celebrate, which may mean cracking open a bottle. But if the celebration lasts though into Saturday night and even on to Sunday lunch you're in trouble.

Cutting back

Why not think about only drinking on one weekend evening as a compromise – either a Friday or a Saturday?

Keeping within the recommended guidelines is important. But it can be difficult to keep track of what you're drinking at home. If you drink spirits, buying a measuring cup is a good idea – otherwise you can easily pour far larger measures than you would get in a pub. Buying small (125ml) wine glasses will help you drink less and keep track too.

The bonus

You'll feel much more alert over the weekend, so you can spend quality time with your family and friends. Less alcohol also means a [better love life](#) so you can enjoy that Saturday afternoon snuggle.

BUT EVERYBODY DRINKS ALCOHOL, WHAT'S UP WITH THAT?

Long hours at work, stressful relationships or simply a hectic social life. There are so many reasons that people in their late 20s to early 40s are spending more time with a drink in their hands.

25% of British men drink more than eight units on at least one day in the week. 25% drink on five or more days a week – and increasingly that's happening at home in front of the TV as well as in the pub.

Key issues

But is there really a problem here? You're not having a pint for breakfast or swigging out of a hip flask in the park at lunchtime. You're open about your drinking, doing it with friends and colleagues – sometimes it's business, sometimes definitely pleasure.

You're pretty healthy, you go to the gym and play sport. And, bar the odd fry up on a hangover, you eat pretty well. So there really isn't anything to worry about, is there?

If celebrating, commiserating, socialising and relaxing all go hand in hand with a drink, it can be hard to stick to a safe level of drinking.

Twenty five per cent of British men drink over 8 alcohol units on at least one day in the week. When you're regularly drinking too much it **will** have an impact. Problems range from affecting your ability at sport to increasing your risk of cancer.

Alcohol related illnesses are not just an older person's problem. Doctors report increasing cases of liver disease in people in their 30s and 40s. Your heart, pancreas, oesophagus and colon are all at risk of damage, and you're more likely to suffer with problems sleeping, anxiety and depression.

And it's not just your health that you need to worry about. People who drink heavily are more likely to end up victims – and perpetrators – of crime. So it may be time to think about what you're drinking.

Risks

Your liver; While rates of liver disease are falling in the rest of Europe, they're rising in the UK, particularly in Scotland. Liver disease has traditionally affected drinkers in middle age. Now figures show there has been an eight-fold increase in the disease aged between 35 and 44. You don't need to be an alcoholic to be affected, regular drinking can put you at risk.

Your heart; Alcohol can cause high blood pressure, which can lead to problems including heart disease and strokes. When you binge drink you can cause abnormal heart rhythms and regular heavy drinking can lead to a condition that causes your heart to become enlarged.

Cancer; More than two or three drinks a day and your risk increases of getting cancer of the gullet, throat, voice box and bowel.

Infertility; Alcohol affects men's and women's fertility

Crime and violence; There are 13,000 alcohol-fuelled violent incidents a week round pubs and clubs in the UK*. Around 40% of accident and emergency admissions are alcohol-related and as many as 70% between midnight and five in the morning.

Too much [alcohol](#) can make you aggressive and violent, and situations that would have been easily solved – with a calm word or simply by walking away – escalate when there's booze involved.

Tips to moderate your drinking

- If you cut down the units you're drinking each week, you'll soon start seeing the benefits. You'll have more time, more money, a slimmer waist, better memory, more energy and perform better in bed, the gym and on the sports field. So, try some of our tips for smarter drinking...
- Have a night off. If you've got a big weekend planned, take it easy during the week. And when you do go out, start drinking later – don't rush for a pint straight after work.
- Not feeling confident about a situation and think drinking will help? Then stick to one or two – chances are your judgement will be well off the mark if you have any more than that.
- Avoid buying in large rounds. There's pressure to keep up with everyone else and you can end up having a drink when you don't even want one.
- Choose your venue. If you're trying to drink less, make the location conducive to a more mellow night.
- Watch what you drink at home. It can be much more difficult to keep track of how much you're drinking than when you're out. That whisky you poured yourself might be a quadruple measure rather than the single measure you'd get in the local pub.
- Find other ways to relax. If the first thing you do after a stressful day at work is head for the pub, break the routine. Read the paper, a book, watch a film, turn up the stereo – they'll all help take your mind off a day in the office. Or do some exercise, just 15 minutes jogging or playing sport can give you a natural high.

What should I be drinking?

- ❖ The recommended daily amount for men is 3-4 units
- ❖ The recommended daily amount for women is 2-3 units

All drinks are not created equal

Discovering how much you are drinking sounds easy doesn't it? After all, you can drink a pint or a half pint of beer or cider, a single or a double measure of spirits or a glass of wine. And if you're counting your units it's easy – two units for a pint, and one unit for half a pint or a spirit and mixer...well, not quite. Unfortunately, the truth is more complicated than that.

How drunk you get depends on how much pure [alcohol](#) your drink contains. One way to calculate this is by counting units.

One unit is 10 ml of pure alcohol - the amount of alcohol the average adult can process within an hour. This means that if the average adult drinks a drink with one unit of alcohol in it, within an hour there should in theory be no alcohol left in their bloodstream, but that length of time could differ depending on a person's body size.

The alcohol content in drinks is also expressed as a percentage of the whole drink. If you take a look at the label of a bottle of wine or a can of lager you will see either a percentage, followed by the abbreviation "ABV" which stands for alcohol by volume, or sometimes just the word "vol". So, wine that says "13 ABV" on its label contains 13% pure alcohol.

So how strong is your drink?

But the alcoholic content in the same types of drinks can vary a lot. Our tastes in alcohol have also changed. Warm, flat ale may have been our national drink 30 years ago, but imported lagers have gradually become more and more popular, and their alcohol strength can be quite a bit higher than ale. For example, some ales have an alcohol content of 3.5%. But stronger continental lagers can be 5% ABV, or even 6%.

This means that just one pint of strong lager can equate to more than three [units of alcohol](#) – almost your daily recommended guideline if you are a man. And research shows that we are drinking stronger drinks than ever before.

We also drink more wine than we used to, particularly wines from hot countries, including Australia, South America and South Africa. And whereas most wines are between 12 and 14% ABV, these robust, new world wines can be 17% ABV - or more.

Mintel, the market researchers, have found that the amount of pure 100% alcohol consumed by British drinkers has increased by 10% since 2000, despite the actual volume of alcohol consumed (in litres) remaining static throughout this period. (2).

“It may be that the majority of consumers are not aware of ABV and don't even notice. So despite a greater societal concern with being healthy ... by stealth we are drinking more pure alcohol than ever,” says Jonny Forsyth, a senior drinks analyst at Mintel.

Large or small?

And don't forget about size either.

Although spirits used to be commonly served in 25ml measures, which are one unit of alcohol, many pubs and bars now serve them in 35ml or 50ml measures.

And if you ask for a glass of wine in a bar you'll be asked if you want a large or a small glass. You may opt for a large glass thinking you're getting a bargain, but a large measure is 250ml - which is one third of a bottle. This can be nearly three units of alcohol or more in just one glass. So if you have just two or three drinks, you could easily consume a whole bottle of wine - and almost three times your [guideline daily units of alcohol](#) – without even realising.

As part of its proposed Mandatory Sale of Alcohol Code, The Government plans, amongst other things, to make it compulsory for pubs and bars to offer their customers the choice of single measures and small wine glasses.

Strategies for lower alcohol drinking

Out and about

- Ask for a small glass of wine – as well as serving wine in smaller 175ml glasses, some bars serve 125ml glasses of wine – that can be one and a half units of alcohol.
- Drink spritzers if you like wine, or pints of shandy if you are a lager drinker. You will get a large drink, but one that contains less alcohol.
- Opt for half pints if you prefer higher strength lager or try lower strength beer you - really won't notice the difference.
- Alternate alcoholic drinks with soft drinks
- Ask questions. If you are still uncertain about how much you are drinking, ask the bar staff. Do they pour doubles or singles? How big is their large glass of wine?

And at home ...

If you're pouring your own drinks at home, it's easy to drink more than you would usually. Here are some tips to help you keep track of your intake.

- Measure spirits instead of free pouring them. Invest in some funky kitchen equipment - you can buy spirit measures and pourers in most good kitchenware shops – or online.
- Or use your imagination! Use an egg cup to pour measures, for example – check how much liquid it contains first by using a measuring jug.
- If you drink wine at home, pour small amounts into your glass. If you fill glasses to the rim, you'll be drinking more than you realise.
- Let guests pour their own drinks. If your half-full glass is constantly topped up, it's hard to keep track of how much you are drinking.

How much is too much?

'Problem' drinking tends to be divided into three categories. And you might be surprised at how easy it is to fall into the first...

Heavy or hazardous

Drinking double or more than the recommended daily limits is higher risk drinking . In Great Britain, just under a third of men and one in five women drink more than the advised limits. Even if you're not out dancing on the bar every night, you may still be drinking too much. Just two large glasses of wine will take you over the suggested daily limit. You should be staying alcohol-free a couple of days each week if you want to avoid health problems, and keep looking and feeling your best.

Harmful

A total of 8% of men and 2% of women drink more than the levels regarded as “harmful” – that's 50 units a week for men, 35 for women. That's an awful lot of alcohol, isn't it?, if you're a women, all you need to do is put away two large glasses of wine every night and you've reached this level before the weekend is out. And if you're a man a bottle of wine on your own just five nights a week gets you very close. Drink in this way and you may become dependent on alcohol and develop long-term physical and mental health problems.

Alcohol dependent

If you become dependent on alcohol you may feel the need to drink throughout the day, drink large amounts at a time, or experience withdrawal effects between drinks. More than one in 25 adults are dependent on alcohol.

Time to get support?

If you think your drinking is a problem, the chances are it is.

Try keeping a [drink diary](#) and recording what you drink, how much and who with. This can help you to get a picture of your drinking and how you can help yourself make some changes.

If you're still worried when you see it down on paper, the worst thing you can do is ignore it. Never be too proud to ask for help. That first phone call may need a little courage but professionals will not judge you, you will be welcomed.

If you have any concerns about your drinking, speak to your doctor or call a professional helpline such as Drinkline – open 24 hours 0800 917 8282. They can also give you the contact details of alcohol services in your local area.