

# Focus on alcohol

A guide to drinking and health

**REDUCE THE RISK  
KNOW YOUR LIMITS**

**GOOD NIGHT OUT**

**GET HOME SAFELY**

**SOCIAL DRINKING**

**CUTTING DOWN**

**MOUTH CANCER**

**DEHYDRATION**

**ROAD DEATHS**

**HEAD INJURIES**

**HANGOVER**

**ALCOHOL**

**ACCIDENTAL**

**FIRE DEATHS**

**LIVER DISEASE**

**TAKE CARE**

**OF YOURSELF**

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**HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?**

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Public Health  
Agency

**Many of us enjoy a drink when at home or out with friends, but alcohol is a powerful drug and we need to be careful how we use it. Drinking too much can seriously affect our health.**

## **Short-term risks**

In the short term, drinking too much can have an immediate impact on our lives. The most common short-term effects of getting drunk are vomiting and hangovers. Other, more serious risks from drinking heavily in the short term include:

- fractures
- head injuries
- facial injuries
- scarring
- alcohol poisoning
- heart attacks or strokes





Drinking too much can also affect our judgement, leading us to do things we wouldn't otherwise do and that we might regret later, for example unplanned sexual activity, or fighting. It can also leave you vulnerable to physical or sexual assault.

In fact, alcohol has been estimated to be a factor in:

- **16%** of road deaths
- **33%** of accidental fire deaths
- **24%** of serious sexual crime
- **60%** of recorded incidents of domestic violence with injury
- **55%** of non-domestic violence with injury
- **37%** of recorded violence without injury
- **48%** of suicides
- **49%** of self-harm presentations to emergency departments



## Long-term risks

Over a number of years, regular drinking above recommended guidelines can:

- damage the liver, heart, brain and, especially with spirits, the stomach
- lead to higher blood pressure
- lower the libido (sex drive)
- make it harder for the body to fight off infections

It can also increase your risk of many cancers, including cancer of the:

- mouth
- throat
- liver
- stomach
- breast

Regular, heavy drinking can also have social costs including:

- damaged relationships
- family break-ups
- money problems
- difficulties at work
- trouble with the law

## Reducing your risks

### Weekly guidelines:

If you drink regularly or frequently (most weeks), then the following guidelines apply to you:

- To keep health risks from alcohol to a low level, it is safest not to drink more than 14 units a week on a regular basis (see page 8–9 for how many units are in common drinks).
- If you regularly drink as much as 14 units per week, it is best to spread your drinking evenly over 3 or more days. If you have one or two heavy drinking episodes a week, you increase your risks of death from long-term illnesses and from accidents and injuries.
- The risk of developing a range of health problems (including, for example, cancers of the mouth, throat and breast) increases the more you drink on a regular basis.
- If you wish to cut down the amount you drink, a good way to help achieve this is to have several drink-free days each week.

The weekly guideline is now the same for women and men. New evidence has shown that, taking into account both long and short-term risks to health, the impact on men and women is similar at this level of drinking.

**14 units = 5 pints**



**of premium beer/cider/lager**

### There are also guidelines for single drinking episodes:

If you want to keep your short-term health risks from a single drinking occasion to a low level, you can reduce these risks by:

- limiting the total amount of alcohol you drink on any single occasion;
- drinking more slowly, drinking with food, and alternating with water;
- planning ahead to avoid problems, for example by making sure you can get home safely or that you have people you trust with you.



### Other tips include:

- avoid drinking in rounds or using a kitty, as you may drink more than you plan or want to;
- drinking water throughout the evening not only slows down your alcohol intake, but it also helps prevent dehydration, one of the major causes of hangover symptoms, so you'll feel better the next day;
- if you're drinking at home, keep track of how many units you're drinking and use measures for spirits.



Some groups of people are likely to be affected more by alcohol and should be more careful of their level of drinking on any one occasion:

- young adults
- older people
- those at risk of falls
- those with low body weight
- those with other health problems
- those on medicines or other drugs



There are also times when it's just not a good idea to drink at all, like:

- before driving or operating machinery;
- when working with electrical equipment or on ladders;
- when looking after children;
- when taking part in potentially risky activities such as swimming and other active sports;
- when pregnant.

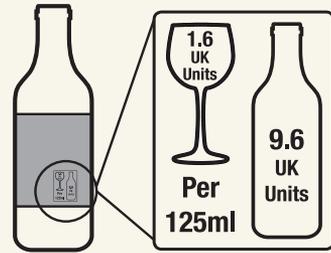


**There is increasing evidence to suggest that people who are overweight or who smoke are more likely to experience harms from alcohol-related disease, than people who drink the same amount but do not smoke or are not overweight.**

## What's in a drink?

Units are the easiest way to keep track of how much you're drinking. One unit is 10ml of pure alcohol, but don't make the mistake of thinking one drink equals one unit. Alcoholic drinks come in many different strengths and sizes – for example, a 500ml bottle of beer might contain anywhere between 2 and 3.5 units, depending on the strength.\*

The number of units a drink contains is often marked on the bottle or can, but the graphics below give you a general guide.



## Beer/lager/cider/alcopop



275ml bottle alcopop/  
ready mixed drink  
1.4 units (5%)



500ml bottle beer  
2–3.5 units (4–7%)



Pint of lager/beer  
(normal)  
2.3 units (4%)



Pint of lager/beer/  
cider (premium)  
2.8 units (5%)

\* The %ABV (alcohol by volume) tells you how strong a drink is - the higher the percentage, the stronger the drink.

## Wine



175ml glass  
2.1 units (12%)



250ml (large)  
glass  
3 units (12%)



Small pub bottle  
of wine (187.5ml)  
2.3 units (12%)



Bottle of wine  
(750ml)  
9 units (12%)

## Spirits



Pub measure of  
spirits (35ml)  
1.4 units (40%)



Bottle of spirits  
(700ml)  
28 units (40%)

## Alcohol and pregnancy

Drinking in pregnancy can lead to long-term harm to your baby, with the more you drink, the greater the risk.

If you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, the safest approach is not to drink alcohol at all, to keep your baby's risks to a minimum.

The risk of harm to the baby is likely to be low if you have drunk only small amounts of alcohol before you knew you were pregnant or during pregnancy.

If you find out you are pregnant after you have drunk alcohol during early pregnancy, you should avoid further drinking. You should be aware that it is unlikely in most cases that your baby has been affected. If you are worried about alcohol use during pregnancy do talk to your doctor or midwife.



## Alcohol and the heart

It was previously believed that drinking at low levels may have some benefits to the heart for men and women over a certain age.

More recent evidence suggests that drinking only has heart benefits for women over 55, for whom maximum benefit is gained when drinking around 5 units a week, with some benefits up to around 14 units a week.



## Every drink increases your risk of crashing

Although there is a legal limit for the amount of alcohol a person can have in their bloodstream and still drive, **there is no safe limit for drinking and driving.**

- Even one drink affects your judgement and reaction times.
- Someone who drinks a lot in the evening will still have alcohol in their bloodstream the next morning.

The only safe advice to follow is **NEVER drink and drive.**

## Alcohol and weight

Alcohol has a high calorie content – weight for weight the alcohol in your drink contains almost as many calories as fat.

- A pint of average strength lager contains a total of 160 Calories, so four pints contains around 640 Calories – about the same as a quarter pounder and small fries.
- 5 vodka and cokes contain around 750 Calories – the same as three bars of chocolate.
- One bottle of red wine contains around 600 Calories – the same as half a 12 inch pepperoni pizza.



**600  
calories**



**600  
calories**

Why not visit the virtual bar at  
[www.drugsandalcoholni.info/alcohol-units](http://www.drugsandalcoholni.info/alcohol-units)  
to check how many units (and calories)  
are in your favourite drinks?

## Getting help

If you are concerned about your own or someone else's drinking speak to your GP, who may refer you to a specialist service. For further information on where to get help, visit [www.drugsandalcoholni.info](http://www.drugsandalcoholni.info)



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