

Your drinking and you

The facts on alcohol and how to cut down



Introduction

For many of us, drinking with friends and family is one of life's pleasures. But for a lot of people, their drinking can lead to longer-term health problems. If you regularly drink more than the lower-risk guidelines,* it can cause health harms that you can't see.

Men regularly drinking around 2 pints of strong 5.2% lager a day (compared with the risk to non-drinkers):

- are three times more likely to get mouth cancer
- are twice as likely to get cirrhosis of the liver
- are twice as likely to develop high blood pressure, and
- increase their risks of other conditions too.

Women regularly drinking around 2 large glasses of 13% wine a day (compared with the risk to non-drinkers):

- are three times as likely to get mouth cancer
- are twice as likely to develop high blood pressure
- increase their risk of breast cancer by around 50%, and
- increase their risks of other conditions too.

And if you regularly drink more than these amounts, your risks of getting these problems can go up much higher.

So how do you know how much you are drinking? This booklet will help you find out and provide useful advice to help you drink less. You'll discover how many units of alcohol there are in your drinks and whether you are drinking above the lower-risk guidelines and by how much.

Larger versions are available to download from www.nhs.uk/change4life

*The lower-risk guidelines are that men should not regularly drink more than 3–4 units a day and women should not regularly drink more than 2–3 units a day. 'Regularly' used in this context refers to drinking in this way every day or most days of the week. But drinking heavily regularly on just one or two days a week can also be harmful to your health in the long term.

In our 6-step plan, we'll give you ideas on how to drink less and reduce the risks without missing out on the fun you have with family and friends.

If you've already visited our website (www.nhs.uk/change4life) and used the online tool, you may already have a good idea whether you are drinking above the lower-risk guidelines and by how much, in which case you can turn straight to the 6-step plan on page 13. Or you can double-check this by reading on. Either way, it's definitely worth reading the rest of the booklet through at some point, just to remind yourself of the facts.

If you want to work out whether you are drinking above the lower-risk guidelines directly from the amount you actually drink, let's start with how many units of alcohol are in different drinks – turn over to find out how...

Online resources

To find out more, visit www.nhs.uk/change4life
Call Drinkline on **0800 917 8282** for 24-hour support.

Alternatively, for more information and tools, visit
www.drinkaware.co.uk

Know your units

Here's a visual guide to how much alcohol there is in some popular drinks. You can refer back to it later on in this booklet when you're working out how much you usually drink. And it'll probably come in handy in the future too.

You might be surprised at some of the figures. For instance, did you know there are more units in one 175ml glass of 13% wine than in a single 25ml measure of 40% spirits?

Many manufacturers put the number of alcohol units on bottles and cans, so this can be a useful reference. Of course with mixed drinks like cocktails it can be hard to keep track of what you're drinking – you can always ask the person serving you if you're not sure.

Drinking at home

At home, it can be much more difficult to keep track of how much you're drinking than when you're out. You probably don't use a clear measure, you're probably much more generous than bars or pubs are, and you can top up your glass at any time.

Keep in mind that the vodka you just poured might be a 'quadruple' rather than the single measure you'd get in a local pub.

Just remember

- The visual guide gives common examples, but many popular drinks can also be stronger, so you really need to find out exactly how strong your own drink is.
- Some pubs serve spirits in 35ml single measures rather than 25ml, so you might be drinking more than you realise.
- Glasses and bottles come in different sizes so this will also affect the number of units you're drinking.



**PINT OF STRONG
BEER/LAGER/CIDER
5.2% ABV
3 UNITS**



**PINT OF
STRONGER LAGER
8% ABV
4.5 UNITS**



**500ml BOTTLE OF
STRONGER CIDER
7.5% ABV
3.8 UNITS**



**250ml GLASS
OF RED OR WHITE WINE
13% ABV
2.3 UNITS**



**25ml SINGLE SPIRIT
AND MIXER
40% ABV
1 UNIT**



**50ml DOUBLE SPIRIT
AND MIXER
40% ABV
2 UNITS**



**275ml BOTTLE
ALCO-POP
5% ABV
1.4 UNITS**



**PINT OF
LAGER
4% ABV
2.3 UNITS**



**750ml BOTTLE
OF WINE
13.5% ABV
10 UNITS**



**PINT OF
BITTER
5% ABV
2.8 UNITS**



**175ml GLASS
OF RED OR WHITE WINE
13% ABV
2.3 UNITS**



**500ml
CAN OF LAGER
3.8% ABV
1.9 UNITS**



**50ml GLASS
FORTIFIED WINE (E.G. SHERRY)
20% ABV
1 UNIT**



**50ml DOUBLE IRISH
CREAM LIQUEUR
20% ABV
1 UNIT**

So what did you drink last week?

How much did you drink last week? Have a think about it – maybe you spent a few evenings in the pub, and on some days you had drinks at home. Write down your drinks for each day in the column below. It's up to you to be as spot on as possible. To get the best advice to safeguard your health, it's important to be as accurate as you can.

Also, if last week was unusual for you – e.g. you drank much more or less than usual – write down what you know you usually drink in a week.

Example:	Drinks	Total number of units
Thursday	1 x 175ml glass of 13% wine, 3 x 1 pint of strong 5.2% lager	$2.3 + 9 = 11.3$

	Drinks	Total number of units
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Now add up the total units for each day to give yourself a total for the week:

Finally, divide your total for the week by seven to give you an average units per day in a typical week:

Are you drinking above the lower-risk guidelines?

Now look at the average units per day and the total for the week that you wrote down for last week (or a typical week). Are you drinking above the lower-risk guidelines?

	Men	Women
Drinking within the lower-risk guidelines	No more than 3–4 units a day on a regular* basis	No more than 2–3 units a day on a regular* basis
Drinking above the lower-risk guidelines, putting your health at increasing risk	More than 3–4 units a day on a regular* basis	More than 2–3 units a day on a regular* basis
Drinking in a way that puts your health at even higher risk	More than 50 units per week (or more than 8 units per day) on a regular* basis	More than 35 units per week (or more than 6 units per day) on a regular* basis

Remember that the more you drink, the more you could damage your health. And it's easy to slip into drinking more without even being aware of it.

Now read on to see the effects of drinking above the lower-risk guidelines. If you have a drink that does not match one of the pictured examples given on page 5, and you do not know its units, you are best to estimate this by choosing a pictured drink that you think is similar.

Get the tools to help you cut down

Visit www.nhs.uk/change4life for hints and tips on how to cut down your drinking.

* Regular in this context means drinking in this way every day or most days of the week. When the guidelines refer to specific weekly drinking levels, this refers to drinking in this way most weeks of the year.



Drinking within the lower-risk guidelines

- Men should not exceed 3–4 units per day on a regular basis.
- Women should not exceed 2–3 units per day on a regular basis.

Drinking within the lower-risk guidelines means that in most circumstances you have a low risk of causing yourself future harm.

Bear in mind that drinking consistently within the guidelines is called lower risk, rather than safe, because drinking is never completely safe in all circumstances. There is convincing evidence that alcohol increases the risk of developing a number of cancers, a small increased risk at low levels of drinking but becoming greater the more you drink. And, of course, drinking even two units is still too much if you're driving, operating machinery or are about to go swimming.

But in general terms, for those of us that drink at all, drinking within the lower-risk guidelines is the right thing to do for our health. If you already drink in this way, you don't need to take any action. While it is not absolutely safe, it is considered to have only a low risk of harm. Just carry on being aware of what you drink – as it's easy to begin drinking more without really noticing.

Drinking above the lower-risk guidelines and your health

- For men, drinking more than 3–4 units a day on a regular basis puts your health at increasing risk.
- For women, drinking more than 2–3 units a day on a regular basis puts your health at increasing risk.

You might be surprised to know that drinking above these lower-risk levels on a regular basis does increase the risk of damaging your health. Alcohol affects all parts and systems of the body and it can play a role in more than 60 different medical conditions. Here are some of the more serious ones.

If you are drinking just above the lower-risk guidelines*, compared with non-drinkers:

- Men are twice as likely to get cancer of the mouth, pharynx or larynx (part of the neck and throat), while women are 1.7 times as likely.
- Women increase their risk of breast cancer by around 20%.
- Men and women are both 1.7 times as likely to develop liver cirrhosis.
- Men are 1.5 times as likely to develop high blood pressure, with women 1.3 times as likely.

If you are drinking quite a bit above the lower-risk guidelines, your risks will be even higher than those outlined above; and you might even already have experienced problems like **feeling tired or depressed**, **gaining extra weight**, having episodes of **memory loss when drinking**, **sleeping poorly** or developing **sexual difficulties**.

Overall, and whatever your age and sex, you're probably in **worse physical shape** than you would be otherwise and you could suffer from **high blood pressure** which could lead to a stroke. Some people get **argumentative** if they're drinking, which can have a negative effect on relationships with family and friends.

Please remember

If you're drinking above the lower-risk guidelines*, it's easy to gradually slip into drinking even more.

* Men drinking 30g a day and women drinking 20g a day.

Drinking at levels that put your health at higher risk

- For men, drinking on a regular basis more than 8 units a day or more than 50 units a week puts your health at higher risk.
- For women, drinking on a regular basis more than 6 units a day or more than 35 units a week puts your health at higher risk.

If you're drinking at these even higher levels, you're at much higher risk of damaging your health. All parts and systems of the body are affected by the alcohol you're drinking, and it can play a role in more than 60 different medical conditions. But at these levels, you're at a much higher risk and your body is probably already being damaged, even if you're not aware of it yet. Some of the more serious conditions are listed below.

If you regularly drink just above the higher-risk thresholds,* compared with non-drinkers:

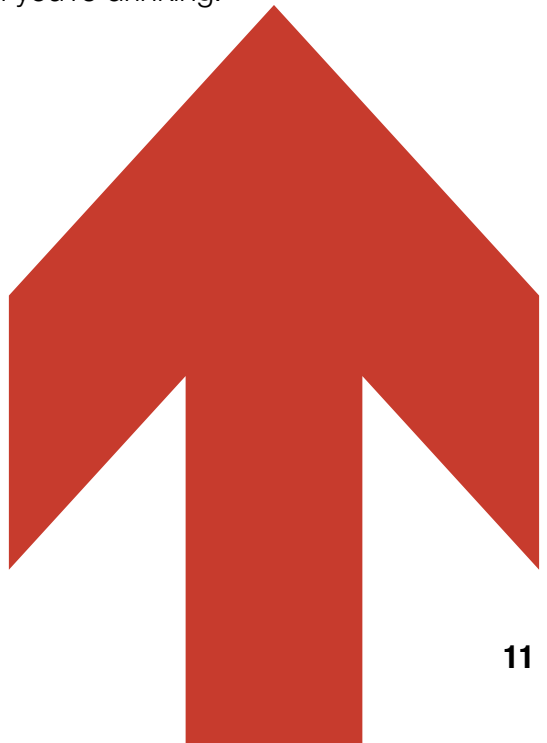
- Women are 2.7 times as likely to get cancer of the mouth, pharynx and larynx (i.e. cancers of the mouth, neck and throat), and men have 3.5 times the risk.
- Women are 2.9 times as likely to develop liver cirrhosis, and men have 2.7 times the risk.
- Men have 2.35 times the risk of suffering from high blood pressure, and women have 1.8 times the risk.
- Women's risk of breast cancer increases by more than a third.

* Men drinking 60g a day and women drinking 40g a day.

The greater the amount of alcohol you drink above these higher-risk levels, the greater the risks. For many of these conditions, in those drinking substantially more, the risks will actually be many times higher than those shown.

You're likely to have experienced some problems already – such as **feeling tired or depressed, gaining extra weight**, having episodes of **memory loss when drinking, sleeping poorly** or developing **sexual difficulties**.

Like those drinking above the lower-risk guidelines, and whatever your age and sex, you're almost definitely in **worse physical shape** than you would be otherwise, and you could be suffering from **high blood pressure**, which can lead to a stroke. It might also be having a negative effect on your relationships with family and friends, particularly if you get **argumentative** when you're drinking.



Should I try to cut down my drinking?

Are you surprised or even shocked to find yourself to be drinking above the lower-risk guidelines, or even twice that level or more? Are you surprised to find yourself at increasing risk or higher risk of a wide range of health problems? If you are, yes you need to lower your alcohol intake and so reduce the current risk of harm to your health. And over the following pages there's a 6-step plan to help you do just that.

By the way, most people just need to cut down their drinking, but

there are people who need to stop completely. Please take a look at the following information before you move on to the 6-step plan.

Drinking within the lower-risk guidelines

If you're drinking within the lower-risk guidelines, you probably don't need to take any action, unless you have good reasons to cut down yourself. But do keep an eye on your drinking, and hang on to this booklet in case you need it in the future.

Some people need to stop completely

You may need to plan to stop drinking completely if:

- You have a health problem, like liver or heart disease.
- You commonly have memory blackouts, so you can't remember things that happened when you were drinking.
- You are worried that you may have become dependent on alcohol.

A 'yes' to any one of these means you should seek professional help for your drinking – speak to a GP or nurse. Or call Drinkline* on 0800 917 8282 for 24-hour support.

* Drinkline offers information and self-help materials, and help to callers worried about their own drinking, along with support to family and friends of people who are drinking and advice to callers on where to go for further help.

It is best to stop drinking completely if:

- You are thinking of becoming pregnant.
- You are taking medication that doesn't mix with drinking (ask your doctor).
- You think your life would be better if you didn't drink at all.

Medical warning

If you have physical withdrawal symptoms (like shaking, sweating or feeling anxious until you have a first drink of the day), you should take medical advice before stopping completely – as it can be dangerous to do this too quickly without proper advice and support.

Call Drinkline on 0800 917 8282 for 24-hour support.

The 6-step plan

You now know quite a lot about the effects of alcohol and the problems it can cause to your health and personal life. And hopefully you've made a decision to try to drink within the lower-risk guidelines.

In the rest of this booklet we've laid out a 6-step plan that you can follow to help you to cut down. It won't always be easy. However, thousands of people like you have succeeded – and feel much better for it.



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Step 1 – Think of some good reasons to change

There are plenty of good reasons to cut down your drinking – here are some examples, and you can probably think of more. Tick the ones that appeal to you the most. There’s also some space below where you can add any more reasons that you think of.

Good reasons to drink less

- You’ll have more time for things you’ve always wanted to do.
- You’ll save a lot of money.
- You’ll feel happier.
- You’ll be less likely to have arguments with those around you.
- You’ll sleep better.
- You can have a positive influence on your children’s own view of alcohol and the choices they make.
- You’ll have more energy.
- It can help you lose weight.
- Your memory of a night out will be better.
- You’ll be less likely to develop high blood pressure, which can lead to a stroke.
- You’ll be less likely to develop serious health problems related to drinking such as heart or liver disease or even cancer.

More reasons for cutting down on drinking:

1

2

3

Step 2 – Set your goals

If you want to drink less, you need to set yourself goals. **If you choose to drink, your ultimate goal should be to drink within the lower-risk guidelines** – but we know it might take a bit of time to get there.

So, first things first. Make a plan for the next four weeks and set goals you can stick to. Choose your goals from one or more of these boxes.

Then to see if your goals are realistic, give each one a score from one to ten.

1 – I'd be really lucky to achieve this **10** – I know I can do this

Tick box

Score 1–10

I will not drink more than units each day.

I will not spend more than on alcohol each week.

I will have alcohol-free days a week.

I will decide how much I'm going to drink before I start drinking.

I will take up a new hobby or activity to do at the time I usually drink most.

I will (add your own in here if you like)

Can you stick to your goals?

Look at your goals again. If you've scored any of them at five or lower, think about changing them for goals you're more likely to achieve. Your goals should help you make a good start at drinking less, and they should be realistic too.

So for the next four weeks, try and stick to your goals. We recommend you use the Units Tracker on page 23 to keep a record of how you're doing.



Step 3 – Know when you might slip up

No matter how much you want to change your drinking habits, there will be times when it's easy to slip up and drink too much. It might be on social occasions, or when you're stressed – everybody's different.

Think for a moment about the last few times you were drinking too much. Where were you, who were you with and what were you feeling? Here's a list of times we can all relate to – tick the ones you think are most relevant to you. You can add any more you think of in the space opposite.

- When your boss is buying the drinks after work.
- When you're meeting new people in social situations and feel nervous.
- When you're at home or at a friend's getting ready to go to a party or club.
- When you're celebrating at a party or club and people are encouraging you to have more.
- When you've had a hard day and you feel like you deserve a treat.
- When you're out with your mates and you're supposed to keep up with them.
- When you need to relax and having a few drinks feels like the fastest way to do it.
- When you're watching TV and you don't really notice what you're drinking.
- When you're lonely or depressed and you think you might as well have another one.

More times when I might slip up:

1

2

3

Step 4 – Plan now for the times you might slip up

Thinking about these times means that now you know when you're most likely to drink beyond your goals. So work out in advance how to cope.

Choose three situations when you're most likely to slip up – for instance at a party, after a stressful meeting at work, or going to watch the football. Write them in the boxes opposite.

Then look at the ideas below on how to deal with them – you can probably think of more ideas that would work for you. Write down your two best ways of coping with these situations in the relevant boxes opposite.

Ways to cope

- Switch to low-alcohol drinks.
- If you drink spirits, stick to single shots.
- Drink white wine and soda (spritzers) rather than just white wine.
- Have a soft drink before each alcoholic drink.
- Replace alcohol with your favourite soft drink.
- Eat a meal before drinking, and pace yourself at celebrations, sports events and leaving dos.
- Delay the time you start drinking – and don't drink at home before you go out.
- Practise how to say no to alcohol when it's offered to you.
- After work, play football, join a gym or go to the cinema instead of the pub.
- If you're going out with people who drink heavily, try to avoid buying in rounds (you could always get the first round and then opt out).
- Let your friends, family and work colleagues know you're cutting down and ask them to be supportive.
- Remind yourself it can help with your waistline too.
- If you're stressed, chill out by going for a walk instead of drinking.
- Don't stock up at home.

Get the tools to help you cut down

Visit www.nhs.uk/change4life for hints on how to cut down your drinking.

Coping with the times I might slip up

Situation 1

.....

.....

Way of coping 1

.....

Way of coping 2

.....

Situation 2

.....

.....

Way of coping 1

.....

Way of coping 2

.....

Situation 3

.....

.....

Way of coping 1

.....

Way of coping 2


.....

Every day, think about the times you might slip up. Then imagine yourself using your coping strategies to deal with them. Do you feel that one or two of them won't work? Then change them for better ones.

Step 5 – Find support if you need it

Some people find it easier to change their habits if they've got someone to talk to. So if you think it'll help you, ask someone for support.

Choose someone you can talk to easily, be honest with and get advice from when you need it. It could be your partner, a friend, a colleague or someone else you know who wants to cut down their drinking. Don't be scared to ask – they'll probably be pleased to help.



And if you ever want to talk to someone anonymously or just need some more information on drinking and cutting down, call Drinkline on **0800 917 8282**. You won't have to give your name or any details that you don't want to and nothing you say will ever be passed on.

Step 6 – Stick to your goals

Enjoying alcohol is a part of many people's lives, and sometimes it's hard to break the habit of drinking too much. But just reading this leaflet means you've already taken a step towards drinking less, so well done.

If you take it seriously, the 6-step plan really can help break the habit and help you drink within the lower-risk guidelines. But you're only human – there's likely to be the odd setback along the way – so don't be discouraged if you have a bad day, or even a bad week! Start the 6 steps again if you need to. Just take it one day at a time, and gradually it will get easier.

Nobody's perfect – if at first you don't succeed, try again.

Drinking within the lower-risk guidelines

If you drink less, your lifestyle will have changed for the better and you're likely to have more time and energy for the things and the people you love. If you choose to drink, your ultimate goal would be likely to be to drink within the lower-risk guidelines. So, after following the 6 steps for four weeks, have a look at how you're doing. You may want to update or change your goals, to help you get closer.



And if you've found it tough, there's always help available. Any time that you want to talk to someone anonymously and get advice on cutting down, now or in the future, you can call Drinkline on **0800 917 8282** for 24-hour support.

Get the tools to help you cut down

Visit www.nhs.uk/change4life

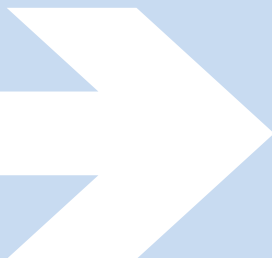
Units Tracker

Here's an easy way to keep track of your units over the next couple of weeks. If you like you can tear it out and keep it in your wallet, on the fridge or wherever's convenient.

How to use it

1. Start by writing in your goal number of units per day.
2. Then when you get a moment, write what you actually drank and how many units it adds up to per day. You can refer back to page 5 for help in working out how many units were in your drinks.
3. Add them up to find your total for the week.

If you think you might want to keep a record for longer than two weeks, just photocopy the pages before you start.



Units Tracker

Example:

Drinks

Thursday

1 x 175ml glass of 13% wine
3 x 1 pint of strong 5.2% lager

Total number of units

$$2.3 + 9 = 11.3$$

	Drinks	Total number of units
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Now add up the total units for each day to give yourself a total for the week:

Finally, divide your total for the week by seven to give you an average units per day:

	Drinks	Total number of units
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Now add up the total units for each day to give yourself a total for the week:

Finally, divide your total for the week by seven to give you an average units per day:

Go online to download a larger copy of this table.



Alcohol Advice and Information

For immediate advice and/or information on where to go for help within your region:

Call 0800 917 8282

This self-help booklet is based on the Drink-Less Programme originally developed at the University of Sydney as part of a WHO Collaborative Study and adapted by the Institute of Health & Society, Newcastle University.


Medical warning

Important – If you have physical withdrawal symptoms (like shaking, sweating or feelings of anxiety until you have a first drink of the day), you should take medical advice before stopping completely – as it can be dangerous to do this too quickly without proper advice and support.

Call Drinkline on 0800 917 8282 for 24-hour support.

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408723 1m 1p Jan 12 (AHP)
Produced by COI for the Department of Health

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