

# Alcohol - A Summary

See your doctor or practice nurse if you are drinking heavily and are finding it difficult to cut down. A more detailed leaflet on alcohol is also available.

## What are the safe limits of alcohol drinking?

- **Men** - no more than 21 units per week (and no more than 4 units in any one day).
- **Women** - no more than 14 units per week (and no more than 3 units in any one day).
- **Pregnant women** - not known. So, many pregnant women have little, or no, alcohol.

In general, the more you drink above these limits, the more harmful alcohol is likely to be. Also, binge drinking (for example, 10 units twice a week) can be harmful even though the weekly total may not seem too high.

One unit of alcohol is 10 ml (1 cl) by volume, or 8 g by weight, of pure alcohol. For example:

- One unit of alcohol is about equal to:
  - Half a pint of ordinary strength beer, lager, or cider (3–4% alcohol by volume), or
  - A standard pub measure (50 ml) of fortified wine such as sherry or port (20% alcohol by volume).
- There are one and a half units of alcohol in:
  - A small glass (125 ml) of ordinary strength wine (12% alcohol by volume), or
  - A standard pub measure (35 ml) of spirits (40% alcohol by volume).
- Note: many wines and beers are stronger than 'ordinary' standard strength.

## What problems can develop if I drink too much alcohol?

**You have an increased risk of developing illnesses** such as: serious liver disease (cirrhosis or hepatitis); stomach and pancreas disorders; depression; anxiety; sexual difficulties; muscle and heart muscle disease; high blood pressure; damage to nervous tissue; accidents - in particular injury and death from fire and car crashes; some cancers (mouth, gullet, liver, colon and breast); obesity (alcohol has many calories).

**You may become alcohol dependent.** This means that if you stop drinking alcohol for a day or so, you suffer unpleasant withdrawal symptoms. For example: feeling sick, trembling, sweating, craving for alcohol. So, you end up drinking alcohol every day to avoid these symptoms.

**You can damage others.** Many families have become severely affected by one member becoming a problem drinker. Emotional, financial, and psychological distress often occur in such families. Often the problem drinker denies or refuses to accept that the root cause is alcohol.

## Tackling the problem of heavy drinking

Many people can quite easily cut down on heavy drinking. Try drinking low alcohol beers, pacing the rate of drinking, or drinking on fewer days of the week. For some people it is more difficult. Accepting that you may have a problem can be the biggest step to returning to sensible drinking. Counselling and support from a doctor, nurse, or counsellor often helps. A 'detoxification' treatment may be advised for some people. Referral for specialist help is needed in some cases.

**Further help:** *Drinkline - National Alcohol Helpline* Tel: 0800 917 8282

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Comprehensive patient resources are available at [www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)