



## WHAT IS ALCOHOL?

Alcohol is one of the most commonly used drugs in the UK. It affects different people in different ways, depending on when and where you drink, who you are with, and how you feel at the time.

**This information in this booklet will help you identify the risks associated with alcohol and give advice on how to stay safe.**

What we normally refer to as Alcohol is a chemical called ethanol, which is made through a process called fermentation. During fermentation, yeast is combined with fruits or grains. The yeast converts the sugars in the fruits and grains into alcohol. Distilled spirits, such as vodka, rum, gin, and whiskey, are fermented and then filtered/distilled to separate the ethanol from the water.

## HOW ALCOHOL WORKS?

When you drink alcohol it is absorbed into the bloodstream through the stomach and intestines. The alcohol is broken down by the liver and expelled as urine, at the speed of about one unit an hour. While your liver works away breaking down the alcohol, the rest is circulated around your body and is sent to your brain where it starts to depress your heart rate and breathing, and affects your brain's ability to control what your body does.

## HOW DOES IT AFFECT YOU?

Initially, one or two drinks generally produce feelings of relaxation and cheerfulness, but drinking more can lead to blurred vision and coordination problems. Drinking even more alcohol can lead to a loss of control, blurred/double vision, dizziness, wobbly legs, vomiting and even loss of consciousness.

The effects start within about 15-20 minutes of drinking and can last a few hours, depending on how much you drink. Stronger drinks (like spirits) and fizzy drinks [like some wines] are absorbed quicker into the bloodstream and will start to affect you sooner. How alcohol makes you feel depends on lots of things, such as:

### **How quickly you drink it:**

Your liver processes alcohol at a steady rate no matter how quickly you drink, Drinking quickly increases the levels of alcohol in your bloodstream, making you drunker, faster.

### **If you have eaten any food:**

Food helps slow down the speed that alcohol is released into your system.

### **Your body weight:**

In general, the less you weigh the more you will be affected by a given amount of alcohol.

### **Your mood before drinking:**

If you feel a bit down before drinking, alcohol may make you feel even more depressed, if you feel angry it can cause you to act aggressively.

### **Gender:**

Women's bodies contain less water than men's, so alcohol is less diluted, meaning women feel the effects more than men. This is particularly true either just before, or during a period.



The more you drink, the more your risk developing a range of health problems (including cancers of the mouth, throat and breast) increases.

If you do drink up to 14 units a week, spread them over a few days and have some drink-free days a week.

**THERE ARE NO SAFE LIMITS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE –**

**NOT DRINKING IS THE HEALTHIEST OPTION!**

#### **Positive effects of drinking at 'recommended' levels**

- Increase relaxation
- Sociability
- Possible reduced risk of heart disease (for some men and women aged over 55).

#### **Short term negative effects of drinking more than the recommended guidelines:**

- Low energy
- Accidents
- Injuries or violence
- Unplanned sexual encounters
- Problems with friends and families

#### **The long term negative effects of drinking more than the recommended guidelines:**

- Alcohol dependence
- High blood pressure
- Liver disease
- Cancer

#### **Spotting the warning signs**

Different people react in different ways to alcohol. For some people alcohol can help them relax and enjoy social occasions, for others, it will damage their health and personal life. Some signs that you are developing an unhealthy relationship with alcohol can be:

- Finding it difficult to stop drinking once you've started.
- Neglecting work, college or school.
- People close to you worrying about the amount you drink.
- Taking risks when you've had a drink, such as driving a car or getting into fights.
- Drinking more than five days a week and regularly drinking more than nine units at each session.
- Regularly thinking about when you can have your next drink.
- Being unable to enjoy yourself or relax without alcohol
- Getting involved in violence.

**If any of the above apply to you then you should consider cutting down. If a few of these apply to you, contact your GP for help and advice.**

## WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

### Dependency:

Regular use of alcohol can lead to tolerance- having to drink more and more to get the same effect. This can lead to physical dependence.

### Alcohol and Sex:

Alcohol can affect your judgement and make you feel confused. You are more likely to have unplanned sex when you have been drinking, or sleep with someone you normally wouldn't go near when you are sober. You are also at risk of sexual assault, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and pregnancy.

### Alcohol and Violence:

Alcohol lowers your inhibitions, causing you to over react in certain situations which can lead to aggressive behaviour. It's not much fun waking up in a police cell with a hangover and a criminal record.

It might also lead to problems with your friends and family- being drunk isn't much of an excuse if you say something to a friend you regret the next day.

Too much alcohol can make you a victim. Being drunk makes you an easy target for robbery and assault. So don't flash your mobile phone, or any other valuables, around. Be aware of your surroundings.

### Mixing with drugs:

Mixing alcohol with other drugs, particularly depressants like sleeping tablets, or heroin, is very risky. The combination produces effects which are difficult to predict and can lead to increased risk of passing out or death.

### Drink Driving:

Driving whilst drunk or being in a car with a drunk driver is very dangerous both for you and other people. You, your friends or pedestrian could be seriously hurt or killed.

### Overdose:

Alcohol slows down breathing and heart rate. In large enough quantities it can lead to loss of consciousness and even death. Signs of alcohol overdose are:

- Slow, shallow, or irregular breathing
- Confusion
- Difficulty awakening the person
- No reaction from painful stimuli (such as pinching)
- Unconsciousness (passing out)
- Blue-tinged skin or pale skin
- Seizures

## HOW TO STAY SAFE

### Passing Out:

If someone you are with passes out turn them onto their side so they can't choke on their own vomit and ring an ambulance or find someone to help you, and stay with them until the ambulance arrives.

### Have a 'spacer' drink:

Use soft drinks or water as 'spacers' between alcoholic drinks. Your night will last longer, it will stop you getting dehydrated and reduce the effects of a hangover.

### Eat:

Food slows the release of alcohol into your system and helps to limit how quickly you get drunk. It's a good idea to eat a meal before you go out, or snack whilst you drink. It'll alcohol give you more energy to enjoy yourself!

### Have small drinks:

Some measures in pubs and clubs can be very large and have 2 or 3 units in each drink. Where possible, choose a smaller glass.

### Have the day off:

Give your liver a chance to 'detox' by having at least two alcohol-free days – this way it has time to recover and repair itself.

### Mixing with Drugs:

Mixing alcohol with drugs, particularly depressant drugs, can increase the chances of an overdose and can make the effects of the individual drugs unpredictable and dangerous.

### Just one tippie:

Avoid mixing your drinks. This will help you keep track of how many units you've had and avoid mixing different strength drinks.

### Pre-Drinks:

Drinking alcohol before you go out means that you could already be drunk before you start on your night out. You are more likely to be involved in accidents and violence and more likely to be refused more alcohol at the bar.



## KNOW YOUR LIMITS

Guidelines for both men and women recommend drinking no more than 14 units a week to reduce the risks to your health. The more you drink, the more your risk developing a range of health problems (including cancers of the mouth, throat and breast) increases. If you do drink up to 14 units a week, spread them over a few days and have some drink-free days a week.

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## GOVERNMENT GUIDELINES

Government recommended safe drinking limits.

Unit guidelines are the same for men and women. Both are advised not to regularly drink more than 14 units a week. Both are advised not to regularly drink more than 14 units a week.

Working out the units for yourself: Multiply the ABV by the total liquid (ml) and divide by 1000  $12 \times 750 \div 1000 =$  **Approximate units for popular drinks**

TYPE OF DRINK	NUMBER OF ALCOHOL UNITS
Single small shot of spirits* (25ml, ABV 40%)	1 unit
Alcopop (275ml, ABV 5.5%)	1.5 units
Small glass of red/white/rosé wine (125ml, ABV 12%)	1.5 units
Bottle of lager/beer/cider (330ml, ABV 5%)	1.7 units
Can of lager/beer/cider (440ml, ABV 5.5%)	2.4 units
Pint of lower-strength lager/beer/cider (ABV 3.6%)	2 units
Standard glass of red/white/rosé wine (175ml, ABV 12%)	2.1 units
Pint of higher-strength lager/beer/cider (ABV 5.2%)	3 units
Large glass of red/white/rosé wine (250ml, ABV 12%)	3 units

\*Gin, rum, vodka, whisky, tequila and sambuca. Large (35ml) single measures of spirits are 1.4 units.



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