

Alcohol and your health

Alcohol misuse is a major public health problem, placing a heavy burden on society, and affecting a large number of individuals of all ages.

Contrary to what many people believe, alcohol is not a stimulant. It is a depressant. This is why drinking too much often leads to impaired judgement, slurring of the speech, a tendency to violent behaviour and loss of short-term memory.

As alcohol also irritates the stomach, heavy drinking can cause sickness and nausea, and sometimes diarrhoea. Alcohol also has a dehydrating effect, which is the main reason why excessive drinking can lead to a hangover. It can also lead to temporary impotence in men.

FACTS and FIGURES

Either on its own or in conjunction with other factors, alcohol is estimated to be responsible for at least 33,000 deaths in the UK each year.

In Great Britain, just under a third of men (31%) and one in five women (20%) drink more than the advised weekly limits of 21 and 14 units a week respectively. Some 8% of men and 2% of women drink more than the levels regarded as harmful, namely 50 and 35 units a week respectively.

More than one in 25 adults are dependent on alcohol, and the UK has one of the highest rates of binge drinking in Europe

It is estimated that up to 17 million working days are lost each year due to people missing work over the effects of alcohol.

Around 6% of road casualties and 17% of all deaths on the road occur when someone has been drinking over the legal limit.

In young adults, binge drinking is also associated with a range of risky behaviours, including a higher risk of contracting a sexually transmitted illness. The harmful effects of drinking are almost entirely related to the alcohol content of what you drink, not the type of drink. In other words, beers are no safer than spirits. What matters is how much you drink.

The alcohol content of drinks is measured in 'units'. Each unit is equivalent to around 10ml or 8g of pure alcohol (ethanol). The number of units in any drink is related to the strength of the alcohol content (the concentration) and to the volume of the drink.

For example, a single (35ml) shot of spirits contains roughly the same amount of alcohol as a small (125ml) glass of wine. This is about the same amount of alcohol (1.4 units) as is contained in a half pint of normal strength beer.

You can find out how many units your favourite drinks contain by checking the Drinkaware website: www.drinkaware.co.uk

PROGRESSION

The short term health risks of alcohol include

- Anxiety
- Sexual difficulties such as impotence
- Impaired judgement leading to accidents and injuries
- Slowed breathing and heartbeat
- Loss of consciousness
- Suffocation through choking on your own vomit (aspiration)
- Potentially fatal poisoning

Drinking heavily also increases your calorie intake, and it is frequently associated with obesity. This in turn leads to increased health risks. Adding 3 or 4 units per day to your usual diet would lead to an increase in weight of around 4lbs in four weeks. The good news is that the short term effects of drinking are reversible; when you reduce your drinking, the symptoms improve.

In the long term, alcohol can contribute to a variety of problems, including damage to an unborn child, liver disease, osteoporosis (thinning of the bones), pancreatitis, stomach ulcers, infertility, heart

disease, raised blood pressure, stroke, dementia and brain damage.

It can also lead to an increased risk of a variety of cancers, particularly breast cancer and cancer of the gullet. It is also frequently associated with mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety.

ADVICE and GETTING HELP

Reducing the risks

It is important to understand safe guidelines. The NHS advice on drinking is that men should drink no more than 3 or 4 units of alcohol per day, and women should drink no more than 2 or 3 units per day.

Even if you don't drink all week, you cannot 'save up' your units and then drink them all in one night. Drinking more than the recommended daily limit is potentially dangerous. Drinking more than twice your daily limit (six units for women and 8 units for men) on any one drinking occasion qualifies as a 'binge'.

If you are pregnant or trying to conceive, it is best to avoid drinking altogether. If you do choose to drink, restrict your intake to no more than one or two units once or twice per week.

If you think you may be drinking above the sensible limits, you should try to take some steps to reduce your consumption.

Some suggestions include:

- Make a deliberate decision about how to avoid drinking too much when you are in a potentially heavy drinking situation, either at home or when you are out with friends, at a restaurant, pub or wine bar.
- Look online for more information - the tips and tools at **www.drinkaware.co.uk** or **www.downyourdrink.org.uk** are good places to start.
- Call **Drinkline**, the national 24-hour helpline, on **0800 917 8282**

- Make an appointment to see your GP or your practice nurse

Getting medical help

GPs and practice nurses are increasingly involved in helping people to stay fit and healthy. And since a healthy lifestyle is a key factor for preventing illness, your GP and/or practice nurse will be happy to spend time discussing concerns about alcohol with you.

If you think you are already experiencing some of the possible harmful effects of drinking, or that you have become dependent on alcohol, your doctor is almost certainly the best place to go.

Your GP can listen to your symptoms and concerns, and will be able to assess whether you have become dependent on alcohol. Your doctor may also examine you to see if there are any physical signs of disease, and will be able to arrange blood tests as appropriate and, if necessary, additional radiological examinations (like a liver ultrasound scan).

Depending on the findings, your GP may offer you advice and support in the practice, or decide to refer you to another professional, such as a hospital specialist consultant.

If you have become dependent on alcohol, your doctor may be able to offer you advice, support and appropriate prescriptions of medications to help you withdraw from alcohol (detoxification).

Alternatively, you and your GP may decide that it would be better for you to be referred to a specialist Alcohol Treatment Unit.

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References can be supplied on request

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