



Alcohol – the facts

The Department of Health advises that men should not drink more than 3 - 4 units of alcohol per day and women should drink no more than 2 - 3 units of alcohol per day. These daily benchmarks apply whether you drink every day, once or twice a week or occasionally. Avoid alcohol for 48 hours after an episode of drunkenness to give your body time to recover.

We advise people not to drink:

- Before or when driving
- Before or when operating machinery and equipment
- Before or when using electrical equipment
- Before or when using ladders or working at heights
- When it might affect the quality of your work
- Before swimming or taking part in active sport
- Before or when taking certain medicines
- If a doctor or other health professional advises you to cut down or to stop drinking.

What is a unit of alcohol?

A unit of alcohol is 10ml of pure alcohol. Counting units of alcohol can help us to keep track of the amount we're drinking. The list below shows the approximate number of units of alcohol in common drinks:

- A pint of ordinary (4%) strength lager (eg. Fosters, McEwans) - 2.3 units
- A pint of strong lager (eg. Stella Artois, Kronenbourg 1664) - 3 units
- A pint of beer / ordinary strength ale (eg. John Smith's, 80/, Guinness) - 2.3 units
- A pint of ordinary strength cider (Dry Blackthorn, Strongbow) - 3 units
- A 440ml can of strong lager (eg. Stella Artois, Grolsch) - 2.2 units
- A standard 175ml glass of red or white wine - around 2 units
- A large 250ml glass of red or white wine - around 3 units
- A small (25ml) measure of spirits - 1 unit
- A large (35ml) measure of spirits - 1.4 units
- A double measure of spirits - 2 units
- A 275ml bottled alcopop (eg Smirnoff Ice, Bacardi Breezer, WKD) - 1.5 units

Remember that lagers and ciders sold in bottles are usually stronger than those sold on draught. The labels of some bottled drinks will tell you how many units of alcohol are in the bottle.

Is drinking good for your health?

Research suggests that low levels of drinking can have health benefits for some people. For men over the age of 40 and post menopausal women who drink one or two units per day, alcohol can lower the risk of heart disease and certain kinds of stroke. It seems to do this by reducing the risk of blood clots.

Heavy drinking has the opposite effect and actually increases the risk of heart disease and stroke.

If you currently drink, do so in moderation. If you are over 40 you might actually be doing yourself some good if you keep consumption very low!

If you do not drink, you should not start drinking for these health benefits. More important steps can be taken to improve your health, such as taking exercise and eating healthy foods.

What are the immediate effects of drinking?

Alcohol is a drug. Its immediate effect is to alter mood. Because drinking makes people feel relaxed, happy and even euphoric, many find it surprising to learn that alcohol is in fact a *depressant* drug. Because of this it switches off, or dulls, the part of the brain that controls judgement, leading to a loss of inhibitions.

Alcohol also affects physical co-ordination. The more drinks you have the greater the effect - speech becomes slurred, vision blurred, balance is lost and movements are clumsy. Heavy drinking depresses bodily functions, so drinking very large quantities can result in unconsciousness, coma or even death. Vomiting while unconscious (or in your sleep) can cause death by choking.

You may be more vulnerable to the immediate effects of alcohol depending on how long since you have eaten, food types, body size, gender, age and genetics.

What are the long-term effects of drinking too much?

Excessive alcohol can cause damage to many of the organs of the body. Potential harmful effects include weight problems, upset stomach, headaches, anxiety, stress, depression, poor concentration, difficulty in sleeping and raised blood pressure.

More serious effects include accidents and injuries, liver disease, cancers (especially of the mouth and throat), strokes, memory loss, sexual difficulties and harm to the unborn child. Heavy drinking can also cause dementia.

Some of these problems will get better if you cut down or stop drinking, so it is never too late to change.

What is 'binge drinking'?

There has been lots of media interest in Britain's 'binge drinking culture' and even the government is worried, but what exactly is a *binge*?

Quite simply, binge drinking is drinking that gets you drunk.

For academics to do research they need a definition of bingeing that is easier to measure. Often a binge is defined as drinking double the Department of Health recommendations or more in one session, so eight units for a man or six for a woman would be a binge.

However, some people who drink regularly would not be drunk at these levels. Others would be very drunk indeed. For most of us, it is easier to think of binge drinking as drinking to get drunk.

Binge drinking matters because getting drunk is risky and can be dangerous.

Do I have a drinking problem?

You might have an image in your mind of what a 'person with a drink problem' looks like; think again. Most people with drink problems are not 'alcoholics' and many will drink only a few days a week.

You have a problem with drink if the problems outweigh the benefits. We think it is useful to think about four areas of your life (remember the four 'L's):

- **Love life** - is your drinking causing problems in your relationships?
- **Livelihood** - is it causing problems at work?
- **Liver** - is it causing problems with your health?
- **Law** - is it getting you into problems with the law?

If your drinking is causing problems in any of these four areas, maybe you should think about cutting down. If the problems are serious, maybe you should think about stopping (at least for a while).

Check out links in the Calma Partnership website (www.calma.co.uk) under 'Wellbeing Centre' or contact your Doctor.

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