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Alcohol and Sensible Drinking - Safe Limits of Alcohol

In the UK, almost half of adults drink alcohol once a week or more. About a quarter of all adults report drinking more than the recommended weekly limit of alcohol.

See your doctor or practice nurse if you are drinking above the safe limits and are finding it difficult to cut down.

What are the recommended safe limits of alcohol?

The UK's national guidance is that men and women should drink no more than 14 units of alcohol per week, spread across three days or more, and have at least two alcohol-free days a week.

There is no completely safe level of drinking, but it's thought that sticking to these limits reduces the risk of health problems.

Pregnant women

There is no known 'safe level' of alcohol use in pregnancy. It's safest for pregnant women, and women who are trying to conceive, not to drink alcohol at all. Alcohol can reach the baby at any stage of pregnancy.

Some women drink in early pregnancy before they know they are pregnant. There are a very small number of studies that suggest the risk of this to the fetus is low, but there's not enough data to be sure.

Your liver processes alcohol. It can only cope with so much at a time. Drinking more alcohol than the liver can cope with can damage liver cells and produce toxic by-product chemicals.

The more you drink and especially above the recommended limits, the greater the risk of developing serious problems. And remember, binge drinking can be harmful even though the weekly total may not seem too high. For example, if you only drink once or twice a week but when you do you drink 4-5 pints of beer each time, or a bottle of wine each time, this is a risk to your health. Also, even one or two units can be dangerous if you drive, you operate machinery, or you take some types of medication.

What is a unit of alcohol?

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 small pub measure (25 ml) of spirits (40% 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).

But remember, many wines and beers are stronger than the more traditional ordinary strengths. A more accurate way of calculating units is as follows. The percentage alcohol by volume (% abv) of a drink equals the number of units in one litre of that drink. For example:

- Strong beer at 6% abv has six units in one litre. If you drink half a litre (500 ml) - just under a pint - then you have had three units.
- Wine at 14% abv has 14 units in one litre. If you drink a quarter of a litre (250 ml) - two small glasses - then you have had three and a half units.
- A 750 ml bottle of 12% wine contains nine units. If you drink two bottles of 12% wine over a week, that is 18 units. This is above the upper safe limit for both men and women.

Isn't alcohol good for you?

This is controversial. Several studies have found that people who have 'moderate' alcohol consumption (around 1-2 units of alcohol a day) have a lower risk of heart disease, diabetes, and obesity, compared to people who don't drink any alcohol, and to people who drink a lot. It's therefore been suggested that a small amount of alcohol might be good for you.

This might not be the right conclusion, though. It's been suggested that the 'moderate' drinkers in those studies are already healthier than the comparison groups in different ways. For example, they tend to have higher levels of education, to smoke less, to be wealthier, and are less likely to be obese or overweight. The comparison with 'never drinkers' is also flawed if they are unhealthy in other ways; 'never drinkers' might have other problems that stop them from drinking, and also increase their risk of future health problems, such as other long-term illnesses, poverty, or previous alcohol addiction.

So, the link between moderate alcohol use and good health is questionable. Some, more recent, studies have suggested there is no, or very little, health benefit from moderate alcohol use, but that there are also harms, such as an increased risk of cancer.

This has led the World Health Organization to state that there is no safe level of alcohol consumption at all.

Do you know how much you are drinking?

When asked "How much do you drink?" many people give a much lower figure than the true amount. It is not that people usually lie about this but it is easy not to realise your true alcohol intake. To give an honest answer to this question, try recording your drinks for a few weeks. An app can be helpful; see the TryDry app in Further Reading for one example. Remember, it is a pub measure of spirits that equals one unit. A home measure is often a double.

The safest amount of alcohol for health is probably none at all. However, many of us don't want to give up alcohol completely, so the next best option is to stick within the recommended limits.

See the [Alcoholism and Problem Drinking](#) leaflet for ideas on how to cut down your alcohol intake.

Further reading & references

- [Alcohol-use disorders: diagnosis, assessment and management of harmful drinking and alcohol dependence](#); NICE Clinical Guideline (February 2011)
- [Antenatal care](#); NICE guidance (August 2021)
- [No level of alcohol consumption is safe for our health](#); World Health Organization, 2023
- [Guidelines on alcohol consumption](#); House of Commons Library, UK Parliament, June 2016
- [Hoek AG, van Oort S, Mukamal KJ, et al; Alcohol Consumption and Cardiovascular Disease Risk: Placing New Data in Context. Curr Atheroscler Rep. 2022 Jan;24\(1\):51-59. doi: 10.1007/s11883-022-00992-1. Epub 2022 Feb 7.](#)
- [Try Dry: the app to track your progress during Dry Jan and beyond](#); Alcohol Change UK

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| Author: Dr Doug McKechnie | Peer Reviewer: Dr Hayley Willacy | |
| Document ID: 4191 (v44) | Last Checked: 18/02/2023 | Next Review: 05/01/2028 |

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