

Your drinking and you

The facts on alcohol, health harms and how to drink less

DRINKING CAUSES DAMAGE YOU CAN'T SEE



SHOULD NOT REGULARLY EXCEED	
MEN	WOMEN
3-4	2-3
UNITS DAILY	UNITS DAILY
1 PINT OF STRONG LAGER = 3 UNITS	
1 LARGE GLASS OF WINE = 3 UNITS	

Introduction

For many of us, drinking with friends and family is one of life's pleasures. But for a lot of people, their drinking can lead to longer-term health problems. If you regularly drink more than the recommended daily amount*, it can cause health risks that you can't see.

Men regularly drinking more than 2 pints of strong 5.2% lager a day:

- **are over 3 times more likely to get mouth cancer**
- **could be 3 times more likely to have a stroke.**

Women regularly drinking 2 large glasses of 13% wine or more a day:

- **are 2 times as likely to have high blood pressure**
- **are 50% more likely to get breast cancer.**

So how do you know if you're drinking at harmful levels? This booklet will help you find out and provide useful advice to help you drink less. You'll discover how many units of alcohol there are in your drinks and what the lower, increasing and higher risk drinking levels are.

Larger versions are available to download from www.nhs.uk/drinking

*The NHS recommends men should not regularly drink more than 3-4 units a day and women should not regularly drink more than 2-3 units a day. 'Regularly' used in this context throughout the booklet means drinking at this sort of level every day or most days of the week.

In our 6-step plan, we'll give you ideas on how to drink less and reduce the risks without missing out on the fun you have with family and friends.

If you've already visited our website (www.nhs.uk/drinking) and completed the questionnaire, you may already have a good idea what your risk category is, in which case you can turn straight to the 6-step plan on page 10. Or you can double-check the calculation of your risk category by reading on. Either way it's definitely worth reading the rest of the booklet through at some point, just to remind yourself of the facts.

If you want to work out your risk category directly from the amount you actually drink, let's start with how many units of alcohol are in different drinks – turn over to find out how...

Know your units

Here's a visual guide to how much alcohol there is in some popular drinks. You can refer back to it later on in this booklet when you're working out how much you usually drink. And it'll probably come in handy in the future too.

You might be surprised at some of the figures – for instance, did you know there are more units in one 175ml glass of 13% wine than in a single 25ml measure of 40% spirits?

Some manufacturers put the number of alcohol units on bottles and cans, so this can be a useful reference when present. Of course with mixed drinks like cocktails it can be hard to keep track of what you're drinking – you can always ask the person serving you if you're not sure.

Drinking at home

At home it can be much more difficult to keep track of how much you're drinking than when you're out. There are no measures, you're probably much more generous than bars or pubs are, and you can top up your glass at any time.

Keep it in mind – that vodka you just poured might be a quadruple measure rather than the single measure you'd get in the local pub.

Just remember

- The visual guide gives examples, but many popular drinks are stronger.
- Some pubs serve spirits in 35ml single measures rather than 25ml, so you might be drinking more than you realise.
- Glasses and bottles come in different sizes so this will also affect the number of units you're drinking.



PINT OF LAGER
4% ABV

2.3 UNITS



PINT OF BITTER
5% ABV

2.8 UNITS



PINT OF STRONG BEER/LAGER/CIDER
5.2% ABV

3 UNITS



500ml CAN OF LAGER
3.8% ABV

1.9 UNITS



750ml BOTTLE OF WINE
13.5% ABV

10 UNITS



175ml GLASS OF RED OR WHITE WINE
13% ABV

2.3 UNITS



250ml GLASS OF RED OR WHITE WINE
13% ABV

3.3 UNITS



50ml GLASS OF FORTIFIED WINE (E.G. SHERRY)
20% ABV

1 UNIT



25ml SINGLE SPIRIT AND MIXER
40% ABV

1 UNIT



50ml DOUBLE SPIRIT AND MIXER
40% ABV

2 UNITS



275ml BOTTLE OF ALCO-POP
5% ABV

1.4 UNITS



50ml DOUBLE IRISH CREAM LIQUEUR
20% ABV

1 UNIT

So what did you drink last week?

How much did you drink last week? Have a think about it – maybe you spent a few evenings in the pub, and on some days you had drinks at home. Write down your drinks for each day in the column below. Please be honest with yourself – to get the best advice to safeguard your health it's important to be as accurate as you can.

Also, if last week was unusual for you – e.g. you drank much more or less than usual – write down what you'd drink in a normal week.

Example:	Drinks	Total number of units
Thursday	1 x 175ml glass of 13% wine 3 x 1 pint of strong 5.2% lager	$2.3 + 9 = 11.3$

	Drinks	Total number of units
Monday	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Tuesday	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Wednesday	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Thursday	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Friday	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Saturday	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Sunday	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Now add up the total units for each day to give yourself a total for the week:

Finally, divide your total for the week by seven to give you an average units per day:

Which category are you?

Now look at the average units per day and the total for the week that you wrote down for last week. Which category are you in?

	Men	Women
Lower risk	No more than 3-4 units a day on a regular* basis	No more than 2-3 units a day on a regular* basis
Increasing risk	More than 3-4 units a day on a regular* basis	More than 2-3 units a day on a regular* basis
Higher risk	More than 50 units per week (or more than 8 units per day) on a regular* basis	More than 35 units per week (or more than 6 units per day) on a regular* basis

Remember that the more you drink, the more you could damage your health, no matter what category you're in. And it's easy to slip into the next risk category without even being aware of it.

Now read on to see the effects of lower risk, increasing risk and higher risk drinking. If you have a drink that does not match one of the pictured examples given on page 3, and you do not know its units, you are best to estimate this by choosing a pictured drink that you think is similar.

Get the tools to help you cut down

Visit www.nhs.uk/drinking and for hints and tips via email, register online or use the coupon at the back of this booklet.

For hints via text message, text 'TODAY' plus your postcode to **65556**[^].

You can also call **0300 123 1058**[†]

*Regular in this context means drinking at this sort of level every day or most days of the week; whilst for weekly drinking, it refers to the amounts drunk most weeks of the year.

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Lower risk drinking

- Men should not exceed 3-4 units per day on a regular basis.
- Women should not exceed 2-3 units per day on a regular basis.

Lower risk drinking means that in most circumstances you have a low risk of causing yourself future harm.

Bear in mind that drinking consistently within these limits is called lower risk, rather than safe, because drinking is never completely safe in all circumstances. For instance, some people may be unusually sensitive to alcohol and, of course, drinking two units is still too much if you're driving, operating machinery or are about to go swimming, or for some who participate in active physical exertion.

But in general terms, for those of us that drink at all, this is the right category to be in. If you are in this category you don't need to take any action, just carry on being aware of what you drink – it's easy to move up the risk categories without really noticing.

Increasing risk drinking

- For men, drinking more than 3-4 units a day on a regular basis is 'increasing risk'.
- For women, drinking more than 2-3 units a day on a regular basis is 'increasing risk'.

You might be surprised to know that drinking at this level increases the risk of damaging your health. Alcohol affects all parts and systems of the body and it can play a role in more than **60 different medical conditions**. Here are some of the more serious ones.

If you are drinking around the increasing risk threshold, compared to non-drinkers¹:

- Men are 1.8 to 2.5 times as likely to get cancer of the mouth, pharynx or larynx (part of the neck and throat), whilst women are 1.2 to 1.7 times as likely.
- Women are 1.2 times as likely to get breast cancer.
- Men are 2 times as likely to develop liver cirrhosis, and women 1.7 times as likely.
- Men are 1.8 times as likely to develop high blood pressure, with women 1.3 times as likely.

If you are drinking quite a bit above the 2-3 or 3-4 units threshold, your risks will be even higher than the risks outlined above.

In addition, if you regularly drink at a level that places you at increasing risk you might already have experienced problems like **feeling tired or depressed, gaining extra weight, memory loss when drinking, sleeping poorly and sexual difficulties.**

Overall, and whatever your age and sex, you're probably in **worse physical shape** than you would be otherwise and you could suffer from **high blood pressure.** Some people get **argumentative** if they're drinking, which can have a negative effect on relationships with family and friends.

Please remember

If you're drinking in the increasing risk range, it's easy to gradually slip into the higher risk category.

¹Men drinking at 40g/day and women drinking at 20g/day.

Higher risk drinking

- For men, drinking on a regular basis more than 8 units a day, or more than 50 units a week is 'higher risk'.
- For women, drinking on a regular basis more than 6 units a day, or more than 35 units a week is 'higher risk'.

If you're drinking at this level, compared with increasing risk drinking, you're at even higher risk of damaging your health. Again, all parts and systems of the body are affected by the alcohol you're drinking, and it can play a role in more than **60 different medical conditions**. But you're at a much higher risk and your body is probably already being damaged, even if you're not aware of it yet. Some of the more serious conditions are listed below.

If you regularly drink above the higher risk threshold, compared to non-drinkers² :

- You could be 3 to 5 times more likely to get cancer of the mouth, pharynx or larynx (i.e. cancers of the mouth, neck and throat).
- You could be 3 to 10 times more likely to develop liver cirrhosis.
- Men could have 4 times the risk of suffering from high blood pressure, and women are at least twice as likely to develop it.
- You could be 2 times as likely to suffer from irregular heartbeat.
- Women are around 50% more likely to get breast cancer.

The more you drink above the higher risk threshold the greater the risks so some of the risks will actually be even higher in some than those shown.

You're likely to have experienced the same problems as increasing risk drinkers – **feeling tired or depressed, gaining extra weight** or having periods of **memory loss when drinking**. You may be **sleeping poorly** or have **sexual difficulties**.

And again, like increasing risk drinkers but possibly more so, overall, whatever your age and sex, you're almost definitely in **worse physical shape** than you would be otherwise and you could suffer from **high blood pressure**. It might be having a negative effect on your relationships with family and friends if you get **argumentative** when you're drinking.

Should I try to cut down my drinking?

Are you surprised or even shocked to find yourself in the increasing risk or higher risk category? If you're in one of these categories, yes you need to lower your alcohol intake and so reduce the current risk of harm to your health. And over the following pages there's a 6-step plan to help you do just that.

By the way, most people just need to cut down their drinking, but there are people who need to stop completely. Please take a look at the following information before you move on to the 6-step plan.

Lower risk drinking

If you're in the lower risk category, you probably don't need to take any action, unless you have good reasons to cut down yourself. But do keep an eye on your drinking, and hang on to this booklet in case you need it in the future.

Some people need to stop completely

You may need to plan to stop drinking completely if:

- You have a health problem, like liver or heart disease.
- You commonly have memory blackouts, so you can't remember things that happened when you were drinking.

A 'yes' to any one of these means you should seek professional help for your drinking – speak to a GP or nurse. Or call **Drinkline**^{††} on **0800 917 8282** for 24 hour support.

^{††}Drinkline offers information and self-help materials, help to callers worried about their own drinking, along with support to family and friends of people who are drinking and advice to callers on where to go for further help.

It is best to stop drinking completely if:

- You are thinking of becoming pregnant.
- You are taking medication that doesn't mix with drinking (ask your doctor).
- You think your life would be better if you didn't drink at all.

Medical warning

If you have physical withdrawal symptoms (like shaking, sweating or feeling anxiety until you have a first drink of the day), you should take medical advice before stopping completely – as it can be dangerous to do this too quickly without proper advice and support.

Call Drinkline on 0800 917 8282 for 24 hour support.

The 6-step plan

You now know quite a lot about the effects of alcohol and the problems it can cause to your health and personal life. And hopefully you've made a decision to try to cut your drinking to lower risk levels.

In the rest of this booklet we've laid out a 6-step plan that you can follow to help you cut down. It won't always be easy. However, thousands of people like you have succeeded – and feel much better for it.

Step 1 – Think of some good reasons to change

There are plenty of good reasons to cut down your drinking – here are some examples, and you can probably think of more. Tick the ones that appeal to you the most. There's also some space below where you can add any more reasons that you think of.

Good reasons to drink less

- You'll have more time for things you've always wanted to do.
- You'll save a lot of money.
- You'll feel happier.
- You'll be less likely to have arguments with those around you.
- You'll sleep better.
- You can have a positive influence on your children's own view of alcohol and the choices they make.
- You'll have more energy.
- It can help you lose weight.
- Your memory of a night out will be better.
- You'll be less likely to develop high blood pressure.
- You'll be less likely to develop serious health problems such as heart and liver disease.

More reasons for cutting down on drinking:

1.....

2.....

3.....

Step 2 – Set your goals

If you want to drink less, you need to set yourself goals.

Your ultimate goal is to be in the lower risk category – but we know it might take a bit of time to get there.

So first things first. Make a plan for the next four weeks and set goals you can stick to. Choose your goals from one or more of these boxes.

Then to see if your goals are realistic, give each one a score from one to ten.

1 – I'd be really lucky to achieve this **10** – I know I can do this

Tick
box

Score
1-10

- | | |
|---|----------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I will not drink more than <input type="text"/> units each day. | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I will not spend more than <input type="text"/> on alcohol each week. | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I will have <input type="text"/> alcohol-free days a week. | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I will decide how much I'm going to drink before I start drinking. | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I will take up a new hobby or activity to do at the time I usually drink most. | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I will (add your own in here if you like) <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="text"/> | |
| <input type="text"/> | |

Can you stick to your goals?

Look at your goals again. If you've scored any of them at five or lower, think about changing them for goals you're more likely to achieve. Your goals should help you make a good start at drinking less, and they should be realistic too.

So for the next four weeks, try and stick to your goals.

We recommend you use the Unit Tracker on the back page to keep a record of how you're doing.

Step 3 – Know when you might slip up

No matter how much you want to change your drinking habits, there will be times when it's easy to slip up and drink too much. It might be on social occasions, or when you're stressed – everybody's different.

Think for a moment about the last few times you were drinking too much. Where were you, who were you with and what were you feeling? Here's a list of times we can all relate to – tick the ones you think are most relevant to you. You can add any more you think of overleaf.

- When your boss is buying the drinks after work.
- When you're meeting new people in social situations and feel nervous.
- When you're celebrating at a party or club and people are encouraging you to have more.
- When you've had a hard day and you feel like you deserve a treat.
- When you're out with your mates and you're supposed to keep up with them.
- When you need to relax and having a few drinks feels like the fastest way to do it.
- When you're watching TV and you don't really notice what you're drinking.
- When you're lonely or depressed and you think you might as well have another one.

More times when I might slip up:

1

2

3

Step 4 – Plan now for the times you might slip up

Thinking about these times means that now you know when you're most likely to drink beyond your goals. So work out in advance how to cope.

Choose three situations when you're most likely to slip up – for instance at a party, after a stressful meeting at work, or going to watch the football. Write them in the boxes on page 16.

Then look at the ideas below on how to deal with them – you can probably think of more ideas that would work for you. Write down your two best ways of coping with these situations in the relevant boxes overleaf.

Ways to cope

- Switch to low-alcohol lager.
- Stick to single shots of spirits.
- Drink white wine and soda (spritzers) rather than just white wine.
- Have a soft drink before each alcoholic drink.
- Replace alcohol with your favourite soft drink.
- Eat a meal before drinking.
- Pace yourself at celebrations, sports events and leaving dos.
- Delay the time you start drinking.
- After work, play football, join a gym or go to the cinema instead of the pub.
- Practise how to say no to alcohol when it's offered to you.
- If you're going out with people who drink heavily, try to avoid buying in rounds (you could always get the first round and then opt out).
- Let your friends, family and work colleagues know you're cutting down and ask them to be supportive.
- If you're stressed, chill out by going for a walk instead of drinking.

Get the tools to help you cut down

Visit www.nhs.uk/drinking and for hints and tips via email, register online or use the coupon at the back of this booklet.

For hints via text message, text 'TODAY' plus your postcode to **65556**[^].

You can also call **0300 123 1058**[†]

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Coping with the times I might slip up:

Situation 1

.....

Way of coping 1

.....

Way of coping 2

.....

Situation 2

.....

Way of coping 1

.....

Way of coping 2

.....

Situation 3

.....

Way of coping 1

.....

Way of coping 2

.....

Every day, think about the times you might slip up. Then imagine yourself using your coping strategies to deal with them. Do you feel that one or two of them won't work? Then change them for better ones.

Step 5 – Find support if you need it

Some people find it easier to change their habits if they've got someone to talk to. So if you think it'll help you, ask someone for support.

Choose someone you can talk to easily, be honest with and get advice from when you need it. It could be your partner, a friend, a colleague or someone else you know who wants to cut down their drinking. Don't be scared to ask – they may be very pleased to help.

And if you ever want to talk to someone anonymously or just need some more information and advice on drinking and cutting down, call Drinkline **0800 917 8282** for 24 hour support. You won't have to give your name or any details that you don't want to and nothing you say will ever be passed on.

Step 6 – Stick to your goals

Enjoying alcohol is a part of many people's lives, and sometimes it's hard to break the habit of drinking too much. But just reading this leaflet means you've already taken a step towards lowering your level of drinking, so well done.

If you take it seriously, the 6-step plan really can help break the habit and change your level of drinking. But you're only human – there's likely to be the odd setback along the way, so don't be discouraged if you have a bad day, or even a bad week! Start the 6-steps again if you need to – just take it one day at a time, and gradually it will get easier.

Enjoy a healthy lifestyle and lower risk drinking

If you drink less, your lifestyle will have changed for the better and you'll have more time and energy for the things and the people you love. **Of course your ultimate goal is to be in the lower risk drinking category.** So after following the 6-steps for four weeks, have a look at how you're doing. You may want to update or change your goals, to help you get closer to achieving lower risk drinking.

And if you've found it tough, there's always help available. Any time that you want to talk to someone anonymously and get advice on cutting down, now or in the future, you can call Drinkline **0800 917 8282** for 24 hour support.

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**Nobody's perfect.
If at first you don't
succeed, try again.**

Units Tracker

Here's an easy way to keep track of your units over the next couple of weeks. If you like you can tear it out and keep it in your wallet, on the fridge or wherever's convenient.

How to use it

1. Start by writing in your goal number of units per day.
2. Then when you get a moment, write what you actually drank and how many units it adds up to per day. You can refer back to page 3 for help in working out how many units were in your drinks.
3. Add them up to find your total for the week.

If you think you might want to keep a record for longer than four weeks, just photocopy the page before you start.

Medical warning

Important – If you have physical withdrawal symptoms (like shaking, sweating or feelings of anxiety until you have a first drink of the day), you should take medical advice before stopping completely – as it can be dangerous to do this too quickly without proper advice and support.

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Units Tracker

Example:
Thursday

Drinks
1 x 175ml glass of 13% wine
3 x 1 pint of strong 5.2% lager

Total number of units
 $2.3 + 9 = 11.3$

	Drinks	Total number of units
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Now add up the total units for each day to give yourself a total for the week:

Finally, divide your total for the week by seven to give you an average units per day:

	Drinks	Total number of units
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Now add up the total units for each day to give yourself a total for the week:

Finally, divide your total for the week by seven to give you an average units per day:

Go online to download a larger copy of this table.

Keeping track of your units

Online resources

- To find out more visit www.nhs.uk/drinking

Text message

- Sign up for timely hints and tips by text message.
Text **'TODAY'** plus your postcode to **65556**[^].
- Or talk to someone via text message – just send your message to the same number, **65556**[^], and we will reply.

Email

- For hints and tips via email visit www.nhs.uk/drinking to register.

Phone for advice

- Call **0300 123 1058**[†].

We hope this information helps you to achieve your goal.
To find out if your drinking could be putting your health at risk go to www.nhs.uk/drinking

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Keeping track of your units

Monitor your drinking, for more information visit
www.nhs.uk/drinking

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Finding it tough? There's always help available,
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