



Alcohol and Sensible Drinking

Small amounts of alcohol do not harm the body. However, for many people, social drinking has led to heavier drinking which can cause serious problems.

What is safe drinking?

The safe limits of alcohol are no more than 21 units per week for men and 14 units per week for women. These limits assume a balance of drinking over a week. No more than 3-4 units on any day for men and 2-3 units on any day for women is advised. Binge drinking (for example, 10 units twice a week) can be harmful even though the weekly total may not seem too high. Of course, even 1 or 2 units can be dangerous if driving, operating machinery or taking some medication. Drinking between 20 and 50 units a week for men and between 14 and 35 units a week for women causes a moderate increased health risk. Above 50 and 35 units respectively is really quite harmful.

What are units of alcohol?

A unit of alcohol is 8g of pure alcohol. This is about equal to the following.

- ◆ A half-pint of beer, cider or lager.
- ◆ A pub measure of spirits (25ml).
- ◆ A pub measure of fortified wine such as sherry (50ml)
- ◆ A small glass of wine.

For example, 3 pints of beer 3 times per week is 18 units per week. That is nearly the upper weekly safe limit for a male. However, each drinking session of 3 pints is 6 units which is more than the safe limit advised for any one day. Another example is a standard 750ml bottle of 12% wine contains 9 units. If you drink 2 bottles of 12% wine over a week, that is 18 units. This is above the upper safe limit for a woman.

Estimating and underestimating drinking

When asked "How much do you drink?" many people will give a much lower figure than the true amount. It is not that people lie but it is easy to underestimate or not realise the true consumption. To give an honest answer to this question try making a drinking diary for a couple of weeks or so. Jot down every drink taken. Remember, it is a pub measure of spirits that equals 1 unit. A home measure is often a very generous double. If the amount of alcohol taken is higher than recommended, then taking steps to reduce it is advisable.

What are the problems with drinking too much alcohol?

Health risks

About 1 in 4 men and about 1 in 10 women drink more than the safe levels described above. For many people who drink more than recommended there is no addiction and they are not 'alcoholics'. To stop or reduce alcohol would not be a problem if there was the will to do so. However, for a variety of reasons some people have developed the habit of drinking regularly and heavily. It is sometimes a surprise to them that their drinking is considered a health risk as perhaps they consider their drinking 'normal'. The health risks of heavy drinking include the following.

- ◆ Hepatitis (inflammation of the liver).
- ◆ Cirrhosis (serious scarring of the liver).
- ◆ Psychological illness, including depression and anxiety.
- ◆ Sexual difficulties.
- ◆ Muscle and heart muscle disease.

- ◆ High blood pressure.
- ◆ Damage to nervous tissue.
- ◆ Stomach and pancreas disorders.
- ◆ Accidents - drinking alcohol is associated with a much increased chance of accidents. In particular injury and death from fire and road traffic accidents.
- ◆ Increased risk of developing some cancers (mouth, gullet, liver, colon and breast).
- ◆ Obesity (alcohol has many calories).
- ◆ Greater risk of alcohol dependence developing.

Alcohol dependence

Alcohol dependence means that if alcohol was suddenly stopped the person would suffer unpleasant withdrawal symptoms. For example, feeling sick, trembling, sweating, craving for alcohol and feeling unwell. As a consequence some people need alcohol regularly to avoid these symptoms. One or more of the following may indicate that someone may have problem drinking or is developing alcohol dependence.

- ◆ Needing a drink every day.
- ◆ Drinking alone.
- ◆ Needing a drink to stop trembling (the shakes).
- ◆ Drinking early or first thing in the morning to avoid withdrawal symptoms.
- ◆ A strong desire or compulsion to have alcohol.
- ◆ Much time spent in activities where alcohol is available. For example, a lot of time spent at the social club.

Problems to others

In addition to the health risks to an individual, alcohol drinking in one person often seriously damages others. Many families have become severely affected by one member becoming a problem drinker. Emotional, financial and psychological distress is often seen in such families. Often the problem drinker denies or refuses to accept the root cause is alcohol.

Tackling the problem of heavy drinking

Once they know the facts, many people can quite easily revert back to sensible drinking if they are drinking above the safe limits. Resist any pressure from friends who may encourage more drinking than you want to do. Perhaps drinking low alcohol beers, pacing the rate of drinking or drinking on fewer days of the week may be appropriate.

The problem of denial

Both heavy drinkers who are not alcohol dependent and people developing alcohol dependence sometimes deny there is a problem to themselves. "I can cope", "I'm only drinking what all my mates drink", "I can stop anytime", are the sort of thoughts that people deceive themselves with. Coming to terms that there may be a problem and seeking help is the biggest step to returning to sensible drinking.

Treatment of problem drinking

Heavy drinking and alcohol dependence can be treated. Counselling and support from a doctor, nurse or counsellor is often all that is needed. A 'detoxification' treatment may be advised for some people. Referral for specialist help may be best for some people. For many people the main part of treatment is coming to terms with the problem, motivation to tackle the problem and accepting help.

Further help

If you feel yourself, relative or friend is having difficulties with drink, there is help available. Either tell your doctor or practice nurse or contact one of the agencies listed here.

Drinkline - National Alcohol Helpline

Tel (Helpline): 0800 917 8282 Monday - Friday 9am - 11 pm , Weekends 6 pm - 11 pm

Advice to callers on where to go for help.

Alcoholics Anonymous , PO Box 1, Stonebow House, York YO1 2NJ

Tel: (01904) 644026

There are over 3000 meetings held in the UK each week with over 40,000 members. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.

AL-Anon Family groups , 61 Great Dover Street, London, SE1 4YF

Tel: 020 7403 0888 Web: www.hexnet.co.uk/alanon

Offers support and understanding for families and friends of alcoholics whether the drinker is still drinking or not

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