



Alcohol

Current guidelines on regular drinking

The recommended safe drinking levels for alcohol are now the same for men and women. They advise:

- Limiting alcohol intake to no more than 14 units a week.
- Spreading any alcohol evenly over a number of days
- Having one or two alcohol free days each week
- Avoiding “binge drinking”

Why should you avoid binge drinking?

There is good evidence to show that having one or two “heavy drinking sessions” per week increases your risk of death from long term illnesses, accidents and injuries. So, it is advisable to limit the total amount of alcohol you drink on any one occasion. There are lots of ways to do this and you may find some easier than others. They include drinking more slowly, having alcohol only with food, swapping strong alcoholic drinks for weaker ones or alternating alcoholic drinks with water/sugar free soft drinks. The way we react to alcohol can differ from person to person, the drinking occasion, time of day, your mood and what you have eaten previously - even if you drink the same amount.

General health risks

The UK’s Chief Medical Officer has warned that drinking over the low risk guidelines (above) increases the risk of a wide range of illnesses. Cancer risk increases with any level of regular drinking, but generally speaking the more that you drink (above the guidelines) the bigger the risk of long term health problems such as high blood pressure, strokes, heart disease, liver disease, pancreatitis, reduced fertility, depression and damage to the brain and nervous system.

Benefits of alcohol in moderation

It is now believed that there are no health benefits from drinking alcohol in moderation as previously thought. The only benefit shown for heart health applies to women aged 55 and only when limiting their alcohol intake to 5 units a week or less. There is no benefit in amounts exceeding this or for any other population group.

Alcohol and pregnancy

There is no ‘safe’ level of alcohol to drink when pregnant and therefore the current advice for pregnant women is not to drink alcohol at all.

Alcohol and blood fats:

Alcohol also increases the amount of triglycerides made by our liver. Alcoholic drinks, that are high in calories and sugar, can potentially raise triglyceride levels further. Even modest amounts of alcohol can affect the level of triglycerides in the blood in some people.

When the amount of triglycerides made by the liver increases there is a need for more lipoproteins to carry the triglycerides from our liver to the rest of the body for energy or storage. These lipoproteins are known as Very Low Density Lipoproteins or VLDLs. If the production of VLDLs cannot keep up with the amount of triglyceride being produced by the liver then this can lead to the development of a fatty liver (a build-up of fat in the liver) which over time can lead to serious liver damage. If you are found to have too much triglyceride in your blood, your doctor may ask you to reduce or omit alcohol completely from your diet.

Further advice on alcohol and medication

It may be necessary to avoid alcohol completely if you are taking certain medications. This is because alcohol can interfere with the way a medicine is absorbed by the body or broken down in the liver. Examples include sedatives (Diazepam) and anti-depressants (Fluoxetine). Care should be taken with long term medications such as Warfarin and anti-epileptic medication as alcohol may make them less effective. There are also certain types of antibiotics which should not be taken with alcohol as the combination can make you ill. There are no known interactions between statins and alcohol but the recommendation is to stay within safe guidelines as statins may occasionally result in an increase in liver enzymes. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if you are unsure about drinking alcohol with any medicines you are taking, or check the patient information leaflet that comes with the medication.

What are units and what does ABV mean

Units are a measure of the amount of pure alcohol in a drink. One unit equals 10mls or 8g of pure alcohol which is around the amount of alcohol that an average adult can process in an hour. The number of units is based on the size of the drink as well as its alcohol strength. For example a pint of ordinary strength lager contains just over 2 units, whereas a pint of strong lager contains over 3 units. The alcohol strength of a drink is expressed as alcohol by volume (ABV). Most drinks declare their ABV on the label.

To work out the number of units in a drink multiply the %ABV by the amount of the drink in millilitres. Then divide by 1000.

Volume (e.g. 330mls lager) multiplied by %ABV (e.g. 5%) then divide by 1000

So 330×5 divided by 1000 = 1.7 units

Many websites provide drink calculators to help you work this out.

Alcoholic drinks contain a lot of calories from both the alcohol and the sugar they contain. If drunk regularly/in excess they can contribute to weight gain and increased waist circumference.

Calorie values of some alcoholic drinks:

Single gin or vodka and regular tonic	(126 calories)
Single dark rum and regular coke	(142 calories)
Medium glass white wine	(130 calories)
Bottle of red wine	(510 calories)
Pint of cider	(180-250 calories)
Pint of lager	(240-250 calories)

For more information check out the sites below

www.nhs.uk/Livewell/alcohol/Pages/Alcoholhome.aspx

www.nhs.uk/Change4Life

www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

In 2016 the Department of Health updated their guidelines on alcohol based on new scientific evidence. The new guidance is reflected in this factsheet.