

The truth about... Alcohol

You've probably heard that with alcohol a little of what you fancy can do you good. But do you know all the facts? How much is too much? Find out if you are putting yourself at risk by drinking too much of your favourite tipple.

How much is safe?

Experts recommend keeping your alcohol levels within the daily benchmark of two to three units a day if you're a woman and three to four units a day if you're a man, regardless of body weight. It's best to have a few alcohol-free days but you cannot 'save up' units to have in one go.

One unit contains 8g or 10ml of alcohol. The % volume of alcohol on the label tells you how many units are in a litre. So a 12% wine contains 12 units in a litre or nine units in a standard bottle (750ml), a 5% beer or cider contains three units in a pint, a 275 ml bottle of alcopop contains 1.5 units.

Sensible drinking

If you do think you might over-indulge, try the following tips to limit the damage:

- Alternate an alcoholic drink with a non-alcoholic one
- Avoid drinking on an empty stomach, the presence of food in the stomach will help delay the absorption of alcohol into the blood and stop you getting drunk very quickly
- Sip your drink slowly so it lasts longer
- Don't top up your glass before you have finished a drink so you can keep an eye on exactly how much you are drinking
- Drink plenty of water before you go to bed to rehydrate and help reduce the effects of a hangover
- Replace a high calorie mixer for a lower calorie one e.g. low-calorie tonic or diet cola
- Try white wine as a spritzer mixed with sparkling water.



Unfortunately, all types of alcohol can be equally harmful, so the above applies to wine, beer and spirits.

Is alcohol good for you...

Moderate alcohol consumption has in fact been shown to have a protective effect against coronary heart disease amongst men and women over 50 and post-menopausal women. In particular, red wine contains beneficial substances that may protect artery walls.

Experts recommend only moderate consumption of wine; one to two glasses per day. Over this amount, the detrimental effects, for example liver cirrhosis, are greater than any positive effects of compounds in red wine.

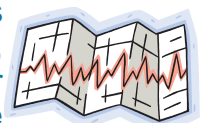
...or bad for you?

Anyone who regularly drinks more than three or four units a day is putting their health at risk. Even a moderate amount of alcohol produces a range of negative short-term effects on the body, including an increase in heart rate, heart palpitations, an increase in skin temperature, muscle weakness and facial flushing. Alcohol also promotes water loss from the kidneys, which can lead to dehydration, particularly amongst people who drink spirits (which have a higher concentration of alcohol) without consuming extra water.

Mental function is also inhibited. For instance: two glasses of wine increases the likelihood of having a driving accident, half a bottle of wine increases cheerfulness and loosens inhibitions.

Long-term, excessive alcohol consumption can be harmful because its toxicity can make our metabolic processes irregular or even damage them.

High alcohol consumption is linked to raised blood pressure, strokes and heart disease, liver disease, pancreatitis and some cancers such as breast and oesophageal cancer. Alcoholic women have also reported a decrease in libido, irregular menstrual cycles and, in severe cases, loss of fertility.



Generally speaking, alcohol tends to affect women more than men. This is because women's livers are smaller and they can't metabolise alcohol as quickly as men so it stays in their system longer.

Pregnancy and breast feeding

Pregnant women or women trying to become pregnant are advised to avoid alcohol altogether during pregnancy. Those who choose to drink should limit themselves to no more than 1 or 2 units once or twice a week. Alcohol may reduce the ability to conceive, while drinking excessively is associated with a greater risk of miscarriage.

As alcohol can pass to the baby in small amounts through breast milk, breastfeeding women should also avoid alcohol. Those who do not give up alcohol completely during breastfeeding should avoid drinking alcohol just before a feed.



Curing a hangover

The symptoms of a hangover are caused by being dehydrated and having low blood sugar. There is no miracle cure, but try some of the following tips to help you revive:

- Drink plenty of fluids to get yourself rehydrated
- Raise blood sugar levels by drinking some fruit juice or a fruit smoothie. A smoothie made with milk or yoghurt can help settle the stomach and neutralise any acid reflux
- Avoid salty, fatty or spicy foods that might irritate the stomach
- Go out for a gentle walk in the fresh air
- Avoid alcohol
- Get plenty of sleep.

Nutritional comparisons of some popular drinks

Finally, it is important to remember that although alcohol contains no fat, it is high in calories:

- 1 glass of wine (125 ml, 12% alcohol)= 83 calories.
- 1 pint of beer (5% alcohol) = 165 calories.
- 1 standard measure of whisky = 51 calories.

It's easy for these calories to add up quickly because you're consuming a liquid, so if you're watching your waistline it's best to moderate your alcohol intake. Remember, alcohol is an appetite stimulant and a night of excessive drinking can lead to overeating late at night.



Diabetes

Diabetes UK advises that people with diabetes, like the rest of the population, should not consume excess amounts of alcohol and never drink on an empty stomach. Larger amounts of alcohol in combination with some types of diabetes medication or insulin can increase the chances of unpredictable hypoglycaemia (a low blood sugar) and subsequent rises in blood glucose.

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