

Food Fact Sheet: Alcohol facts

The risk of developing a range of illnesses, including heart disease and certain cancers, increases with any amount of alcohol you drink on a regular basis. However, if you keep within the recommended limits, you can reduce this risk.

The Department for Health recommends that if you are a regular drinker, i.e. you drink most weeks:

- you should not drink more than 14 units per week
- it is best to spread the units evenly over three days or more
- you should have several drink free days each week

If you have one or two heavy drinking sessions, there are increased health risks, whether from accidents or injuries or from increasing the possibility of developing certain diseases.

In the past, moderate drinking was associated with health benefits, but recent research has shown such benefits to be much less than previously thought and may only be significant among certain groups of people.

Understanding units

One unit of pure alcohol is 10ml (1cl) or 8g.

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)
- a small pub measure (25ml) of spirits (40% alcohol by volume)
- a standard pub measure (50ml) 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 (125ml) of ordinary strength wine (12% alcohol by volume)
- a standard pub measure (35ml) of spirits (40% alcohol by volume).

Remember, many wines and beers and ciders readily available in bars and restaurants are stronger than the more traditional 'ordinary' strengths so it may be worth asking the strength if you are not familiar with the drink. When drinking out, wines are often offered in 175ml or 250ml servings and if you are drinking at home you are more likely to pour a yourself a more generous amount than a standard pub measure.

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 (500ml), which is 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 (250ml), two small glasses, then you have had three and a half units.

Drinking too much

Binge drinking (more than four units at any one time) and drinking to get drunk, common among young adults, is bad for your health and should always be avoided. In other words you should not save up all your units for the week and drink them all in one go. Studies have shown that young female British women have amongst the highest intakes of alcohol in the world.

Binge drinking can cause a range of social and health issues, for example violent and unsafe behaviour, and can often result in vomiting, collapse and seizures which can be potentially life threatening.

Heavy and prolonged drinking can lead to a wide range of health problems, including certain cancers, liver disease, stroke, high blood pressure and can affect mental health.

Alcohol tolerance is different in everyone, however those who feel they can drink large amounts without feeling unwell are still causing the same damage to their bodies and put themselves at the same risk of social and health problems.

Many people refer to themselves as social drinkers and because they are not alcoholics or binge drinkers, may wrongly think they are not at risk. However, social drinkers may easily consume more than 14 units on a regular basis and are also putting their health at risk. For example, they are:

- three times more likely to have mouth cancer
- three times more likely to have a stroke

Women who regularly drink two large glasses of 13% wine (6.5 units) or more a day:

- are twice as likely to have high blood pressure
- are 50% more likely to have breast cancer.

Many people who have alcohol related health problems aren't alcoholics. They're people who have regularly drunk more than the recommended levels for some years. If you do drink too much, you should avoid alcohol for at least 48 hours to give your body a chance to recover.

Alcohol and calories

Be aware that alcohol is high in calories and so can contribute to weight gain. One gram of alcohol provides seven calories (7kcal), compared with 4kcal per gram for carbohydrate and protein. One unit of alcohol contains eight grams or 10ml of alcohol which provides 56kcal. However other ingredients in alcoholic drinks, such as sugar, cream and fruit juice, can add more calories. Many people forget to include drinks and alcohol when they are watching or recalling what they eat. It's easy for these 'liquid calories' to add up quickly and unnoticed. Alcohol is also an appetite stimulant and can lead to overeating at mealtimes, late at night and even the next day.

To provide all the nutrients needed to maintain health and reduce risk of disease, a healthy balanced diet containing a variety of foods is needed. Alcoholic drinks lack most essential nutrients and vitamins so if alcohol is providing most of the calories in the diet then there is a risk of nutritional deficiencies.

The practice of 'saving' calories from food for alcohol i.e. drinking alcohol rather than eating to prevent putting on weight, could put you at risk of not getting all the nutrients your body needs.

Alcohol is also a diuretic, which means it makes the body lose more water than usual. When you drink alcohol, it's a good idea to drink water or other low-calorie soft drinks in between and afterwards to avoid dehydration.

Practical tips on cutting down

If you want to try to cut down on the amount of alcohol you are drinking, here are some practical tips:

- Set yourself a limit on how much you are going to drink on a night out or set yourself a budget of how much money you will spend on alcohol
- Let your friends and family know you are trying to cut down so they can support you
- Always try to eat before you start drinking – eat before you go out for the evening or have a meal while you are out. Even a snack at work will help, for example vegetable and bean soup, oat cakes or a smoothie
- Don't drink alcohol if you are thirsty
- Avoid salty snacks such as crisps and salted nuts because these make you thirstier (as well as being high in fat and salt)
- Have some non-alcoholic or low-alcoholic drinks through the evening instead
- Always have a glass or bottle of water with you or a jug of water on the table as well as your alcoholic drink
- Think about the strength of your drink – choose beers or lagers that contain less alcohol (they will have a lower 'abv', or 'alcohol by volume')
- Sip a drink slowly so it lasts longer
- Don't top up the glass before it's finished so the volume consumed can be monitored more accurately
- Replace high calorie mixer for a lower calorie one, like low calorie tonic or diet cola and alternate drinks with water/diet/low calorie drinks
- Try white wine as a spritzer mixed with sparkling water
- Choose half pint, small can, small glass, single measure
- Use a smaller wine glass

Pregnancy and breastfeeding

If are planning a pregnancy, you are advised to stop drinking alcohol altogether. Alcohol can reduce the ability to conceive, damage the unborn baby and may even lead to early miscarriage. If you have been drinking before you found out you were pregnant, you should stop drinking for the remainder of the pregnancy. However, try not to worry as it is very unlikely to have caused any harm, but you should stop drinking for the remainder of the pregnancy. If you are breastfeeding, occasional drinking, such as one or two units once or twice a week, is not harmful to your baby but drinking any more than this can cause problems. It's best to avoid drinking alcohol just before a feed. This is because the alcohol can pass to the baby in small amounts through breast milk.

You should also take care or seek medical advice if you are ill or suffer from conditions such as diabetes, gastric ulcers, high blood pressure or depression or taking certain medication. If you are unsure, then check with your GP or pharmacist.