Know your limits

A self-help guide to help you avoid harm from drinking too much alcohol too often
If you drink too much too often, you are putting your health at risk

This short guide aims to help you understand how alcohol can put you at risk and also provides support if you decide you want to cut down.
The recommended advice for lower risk drinking is that:

- Women should not regularly* drink more than 2-3 units a day – that’s one large glass of wine or one large double gin and tonic
- Men should not regularly* drink more than 3-4 units a day – there are three units in a pint of premium strength lager or beer

Drinking alcohol regularly above this level places you at increasing risk of developing a serious illness.

*‘Regularly’ here means every day or most days of the week (not just drinking at these levels once a week).

FACT: Drinking alcohol is the second biggest risk factor for cancers of the mouth and throat (smoking being the first).
FACT: A man who regularly drinks more than eight units a day doubles his risk of stroke.

FACT: Women increase their risk of breast cancer when drinking even slightly above the lower risk threshold.
Drinking levels that present a higher risk to health:

- Women regularly drinking over 6 units a day (or over 35 units a week) – that’s about 2 large glasses of wine a day on a regular basis
- Men regularly drinking over 8 units a day (or over 50 units a week) – that’s about 3 pints of bitter a day on a regular basis

If you are drinking these amounts, use the advice on this card to help reduce your drinking; but you may need more help, especially if you notice other problems such as:

- health problems, e.g. liver, heart or blood pressure problems
- feelings of tiredness
- gaining extra weight
- experiencing memory blackouts when drinking
- having early morning shakes or sweats
- others mentioning your drinking
It’s not just your health that is affected by drinking above lower risk guidelines – it can also impact:

**Fertility**

- Lowering men’s sex drive and increasing risk of impotence and infertility
- Drinking alcohol when pregnant can seriously damage the development of the unborn baby

**Appearance**

- Weight gain – alcohol is high in calories. A pint of average strength lager contains a total of 160 calories, so drinking four pints in an evening adds up to 640 calories (Kcal)
- Skin – alcohol dehydrates your body and your skin. It also widens blood vessels causing your skin to look red or blotchy
Drinking above the recommended guidelines may also affect:

**Mental health**
- Far from reducing stress or relieving anxiety, alcohol is associated with depression and risk-taking behaviour.
- Disrupting normal sleeping patterns resulting in insomnia and a lack of restful sleep which can contribute to stress and anxiety.

**Relationships**
- Frequent excessive drinking can damage relationships between friends, family and partners.
- Some people drink more if they are having trouble in a relationship, but this can just make the problems worse and create a vicious circle.
If you want to cut down your alcohol intake and reduce risks to your health, this six step plan can help.

**Step 1**

**Identify good reasons for change**

Pick your three best reasons – you may want to select from these benefits of drinking less:

- Free up cash
- Improve relationships with family, partner or friends
- Feel healthier – now and in the future
- Lose weight
- Feel happier
- Sleep better and be more alert every day
- Better performance at work
- Better ability to cope, to stay on top of things
- Wake up looking forward to the day
- Enjoy being in a relaxed mood, rather than losing control
Step 2

Set your own goals

- Plan how many drinks you will have each day – be realistic
- Record how many drinks/units you have actually had
- If you do drink heavily in one session, build in at least 48 hours alcohol-free after this to give your liver a chance to recover
- If you want to reduce an over-reliance on alcohol, having 2 alcohol-free days a week can be very useful
- Know how many units are in your drink and keep track
- Encourage your partner/friends/family to support you

Step 3

Identify challenging times

- Consider the times when you drink most. High risk times might be the pub after work, when watching TV or when you’ve had a hard day
Step 4

Deal with these high risk times
Pick two ways to deal with these situations, such as:

- Start drinking later in the evening – don’t “front load” at home before going out
- Have less alcohol available in the home
- Find other ways to de-stress or unwind – cinema, gym, meeting with friends etc
- Buy smaller glasses of wine, not large
- Have “long” drinks (spirits with big mixers) or have a soft drink between your alcoholic drinks – and don’t rush your drinks
- Leave the pub/bar while “you’re still ahead”

Step 5

Find support
- Don’t be afraid or embarrassed to ask for support. It can really help to talk to someone you trust, and to ask for advice when you need it
- Consider a partner, friend or colleague, or someone who also wants to change their drinking habits
- Or contact your local health care team and ask advice of your doctor or nurse

**Step 6**

**Stick to your goals**
- Don’t be discouraged if you don’t always stick to the goals you set
- You can then focus on those particular goals
- That’s how complete success can be achieved – just take one day at a time
Here to help

Call Drinkline, tel: 0800 917 82 82
for immediate advice and info on
where to get help in your local region

Log on to www.nhs.uk/units or
www.nhs.uk/drinkcheck