Your drinking and you

The facts on alcohol, health harms and how to drink less

DRINKING CAUSES DAMAGE YOU CAN’T SEE
Introduction

For many of us, drinking with friends and family is one of life's pleasures. But for a lot of people, their drinking can lead to longer-term health problems. If you regularly drink more than the recommended daily amount*, it can cause health risks that you can't see.

Men regularly drinking more than 2 pints of strong 5.2% lager a day:

- are over 3 times more likely to get mouth cancer
- could be 3 times more likely to have a stroke.

Women regularly drinking 2 large glasses of 13% wine or more a day:

- are 2 times as likely to have high blood pressure
- are 50% more likely to get breast cancer.

So how do you know if you're drinking at harmful levels? This booklet will help you find out and provide useful advice to help you cut down. You'll discover how many units of alcohol there are in your drinks and what the lower, increasing and higher risk drinking levels are.

Larger versions are available to download from www.nhs.uk/drinking

*The NHS recommends men should not regularly drink more than 3-4 units a day and women should not regularly drink more than 2-3 units a day. 'Regularly' used in this context throughout the booklet means drinking at this sort of level every day or most days of the week.
In our 6-step plan, we'll give you ideas on how to drink less and reduce the risks without missing out on the fun you have with family and friends.

If you've already visited our website (www.nhs.uk/drinking) and completed the questionnaire, you may already have a good idea what your risk category is, in which case you can turn straight to the 6-step plan on page 10. Or you can double-check the calculation of your risk category by reading on. Either way it's definitely worth reading the rest of the booklet through at some point, just to remind yourself of the facts.

If you want to work out your risk category directly from the amount you actually drink, let's start with how many units of alcohol are in different drinks – turn over to find out how...
Know your units

Here’s a visual guide to how much alcohol there is in some popular drinks. You can refer back to it later on in this booklet when you’re working out how much you usually drink. And it’ll probably come in handy in the future too.

You might be surprised at some of the figures – for instance, did you know there are more units in one 175ml glass of 13% wine than in a single 25ml measure of 40% spirits?

Some manufacturers put the number of alcohol units on bottles and cans, so this can be a useful reference when present. Of course with mixed drinks like cocktails it can be hard to keep track of what you’re drinking – you can always ask the person serving you if you’re not sure.

Drinking at home

At home it can be much more difficult to keep track of how much you’re drinking than when you’re out. There are no measures, you’re probably much more generous than bars or pubs are, and you can top up your glass at any time.

Keep it in mind – that vodka you just poured might be a quadruple measure rather than the single measure you’d get in the local pub.

Just remember

- The visual guide gives examples, but many popular drinks are stronger.
- Some pubs serve spirits in 35ml single measures rather than 25ml, so you might be drinking more than you realise.
- Glasses and bottles come in different sizes so this will also affect the number of units you’re drinking.
So what did you drink last week?

How much did you drink last week? Have a think about it – maybe you spent a few evenings in the pub, and on some days you had drinks at home. Write down your drinks for each day in the column below. Please be honest with yourself – to get the best advice to safeguard your health it’s important to be as accurate as you can.

Also, if last week was unusual for you – e.g. you drank much more or less than usual – write down what you’d drink in a normal week.

Example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Drinks</th>
<th>Total number of units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 x 175ml glass of 13% wine</td>
<td>2.3 + 9 = 11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 x 1 pint of strong 5.2% lager</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Drinks</th>
<th>Total number of units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now add up the total units for each day to give yourself a total for the week:

Finally, divide your total for the week by seven to give you an average units per day:
Which category are you?

Now look at the average units per day and the total for the week that you wrote down for last week. Which category are you in?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lower risk</strong></td>
<td><strong>No more than 2-3 units a day on a regular basis</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Increasing risk</strong></td>
<td><strong>More than 2-3 units a day on a regular basis</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Higher risk</strong></td>
<td><strong>More than 35 units per week (or more than 6 units per day) on a regular basis</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>More than 50 units per week (or more than 8 units per day) on a regular basis</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Remember that the more you drink, the more you could damage your health, no matter what category you're in. And it's easy to slip into the next risk category without even being aware of it.

Now read on to see the effects of lower risk, increasing risk and higher risk drinking. If you have a drink that does not match one of the pictured examples given on page 3, and you do not know its units, you are best to estimate this by choosing a pictured drink that you think is similar.

Get the tools to help you cut down

Visit [www.nhs.uk/drinking](http://www.nhs.uk/drinking) and for hints and tips via email, register online or use the coupon at the back of this booklet.

You can also call 0300 123 1530*  

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*Regular in this context means drinking at this sort of level every day or most days of the week; whilst for weekly drinking, it refers to the amounts drunk most weeks of the year.

*Calls to 03 numbers should cost no more than geographic 01 or 02 UK wide calls, and may be part of inclusive mobile minutes subject to your provider and your call package. Mobile phone charges may apply. Contact your service provider for more information.
Lower risk drinking

- Men should not exceed 3-4 units per day on a regular basis.
- Women should not exceed 2-3 units per day on a regular basis.

**Lower risk drinking means that in most circumstances you have a low risk of causing yourself future harm.**

Bear in mind that drinking consistently within these limits is called lower risk, rather than safe, because drinking is never completely safe in all circumstances. For instance, some people may be unusually sensitive to alcohol and, of course, drinking two units is still too much if you’re driving, operating machinery or are about to go swimming, or for some who participate in active physical exertion.

But in general terms, for those of us that drink at all, this is the right category to be in. If you are in this category you don’t need to take any action, just carry on being aware of what you drink – it’s easy to move up the risk categories without really noticing.

Increasing risk drinking

- For men, drinking more than 3-4 units a day on a regular basis is ‘increasing risk’.
- For women, drinking more than 2-3 units a day on a regular basis is ‘increasing risk’.

You might be surprised to know that drinking at this level increases the risk of damaging your health. Alcohol affects all parts and systems of the body and it can play a role in more than 60 different medical conditions. Here are some of the more serious ones.
If you are drinking around the increasing risk threshold, compared to non-drinkers\textsuperscript{1}:

- Men are 1.8 to 2.5 times as likely to get cancer of the mouth, pharynx or larynx (part of the neck and throat), whilst women are 1.2 to 1.7 times as likely.
- Women are 1.2 times as likely to get breast cancer.
- Men are 2 times as likely to develop liver cirrhosis, and women 1.7 times as likely.
- Men are 1.8 times as likely to develop high blood pressure, with women 1.3 times as likely.

If you are drinking quite a bit above the 2-3 or 3-4 units threshold, your risks will be even higher than the risks outlined above.

In addition, if you regularly drink at a level that places you at increasing risk you might already have experienced problems like feeling tired or depressed, gaining extra weight, memory loss when drinking, sleeping poorly and sexual difficulties.

Overall, and whatever your age and sex, you’re probably in worse physical shape than you would be otherwise and you could suffer from high blood pressure. Some people get argumentative if they’re drinking, which can have a negative effect on relationships with family and friends.

**Please remember**

If you’re drinking in the increasing risk range, it’s easy to gradually slip into the higher risk category.