Think About Drink

Alcohol and health: all you need to know
There's more to a drink than you think

Alcohol is something to be enjoyed and, most of the time, drinking doesn't cause any problems. But drinking too much or at the wrong time can be harmful.

The important thing is to know where the benefits end and the risks begin. The daily benchmarks for adult men and women are a guide to how much you can drink without putting your health at risk. They apply whether you drink every day, once or twice a week, or occasionally.

The benchmarks are not targets to drink up to. There are times and circumstances when it makes sense not to drink at all.

The benchmarks don't apply to young people who haven't reached physical maturity.

For men over 40, there can be positive health benefits from drinking moderate amounts of alcohol.

Drink for drink, alcohol has a greater effect on a woman than a man. Women are generally smaller and lighter, their bodies contain less water and their metabolism is different.

For women who have been through the menopause, there can be positive health benefits from drinking moderate amounts of alcohol.

Daily benchmark guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Men</th>
<th>5 UNITS</th>
<th>4 UNITS</th>
<th>3 UNITS</th>
<th>2 UNITS</th>
<th>1 UNIT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>IF YOU REGULARLY DRINK 4 OR MORE UNITS A DAY THERE IS AN INCREASING RISK TO HEALTH</td>
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<td>IF YOU DRINK BETWEEN 3 AND 4 UNITS A DAY OR LESS... THERE ARE NO SIGNIFICANT RISKS TO YOUR HEALTH</td>
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| Women | IF YOU REGULARLY DRINK 3 OR MORE UNITS A DAY THERE IS AN INCREASING RISK TO HEALTH |
|       | IF YOU DRINK BETWEEN 2 AND 3 UNITS A DAY OR LESS... THERE ARE NO SIGNIFICANT RISKS TO YOUR HEALTH |
The reference guide at the bottom of the page shows three measures of drink that are easy to remember and are equivalent to one unit. But what happens if you drink wine or beer that is stronger? Or you drink another type of drink? More and more drinks are now being labelled with the number of units they contain.

You can work out the exact number of units by multiplying the volume of the drink (in ml) by the % abv and dividing it by 1000. For example the number of units in a 330ml bottle of lager with a 5% abv is:

\[ 330 \times 5 = 1650 \div 1000 = (1.7 \text{ units}) \]

### Wines

- **125ml** glass of wine at 11% or 12% abv contains about 1.5 units
- **175ml** glass of wine at 11% or 12% abv contains about 2 units
- **75cl** bottle of wine at 9% or 10% abv contains between 6.8 and 7.5 units
- **75cl** bottle of wine at 11% to 12% abv contains between 8 and 9 units

### Sherry, Port, Madeira or Vermouth

- **50ml** measure contains about 1 unit

### Beer, Lager or Cider

- **330ml** bottle at 4% or 5% abv contains about 1.5 units
- **440ml** can at 4% or 5% abv contains about 2 units
- **440ml** can at 8% or 9% abv contains between 3.5 and 4 units
- **500ml** can at 8% or 9% abv contains between 4 and 4.5 units

### Low alcohol Beer and Lager

- **440ml** can at 1.2% abv contains 0.5 units

### Alcopops/Ready-mixed drinks

- **330ml** bottle at 4% to 6% abv contains between 1.3 and 2 units
- **200ml** bottle at 13.5% abv contains 2.7 units

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How many units are in your usual drink?

What's a unit?

The following measures of drink all contain one unit of alcohol.

- **Half pint of ordinary strength lager/beer/cider (3.5% abv) = 1 UNIT**
- **A 25ml pub measure of spirits (40% abv) = 1 UNIT**
- **A small glass of wine (Many wines are 11% or 12% abv) (9% abv) = 1 UNIT**
Alcohol
what it is and what it does

All alcoholic drinks contain pure alcohol in varying quantities. The strength of alcoholic drinks is shown by a number which may be preceded by the word ‘alcohol’ or the abbreviation ‘alc’, followed by % vol. This is known as the alcohol by volume (ABV).

The higher the percentage, the stronger the drink.

As explained on the previous page alcohol can be measured in 'units'. Increasingly drinks are being labelled with the number of units they contain. This can help you work out how much alcohol you drink in a day and compare it with the recommended daily benchmark. Remember, drinks poured at home are often more generous than pub measures so you may underestimate the number of units you drink.

Alcohol is absorbed into your bloodstream within a few minutes and is carried to all parts of the body including the brain.

The amount of alcohol in your body, your ‘blood alcohol concentration’ (BAC), depends on many factors including how much you have drunk and your size and weight. If you are smaller and lighter you will have more alcohol per kilo. A full stomach can delay the time for alcohol to be absorbed. Stronger drinks like spirits, and fizzy drinks like champagne or sparkling cider, are absorbed more quickly.

It is difficult to know how much alcohol is in your bloodstream at any one time or what effect it will have. The drink-drive limit cannot accurately be converted into a number of units. The only way to be sure that you’re safe is not to drink at all if you are going to drive.

A healthy liver takes about one hour to break down and remove one unit of alcohol. So if you drink two pints of ordinary strength beer or half a bottle of wine (four units) at lunchtime, there will still be alcohol in your bloodstream three hours later. If you drink heavily in the evening, you may still be over the legal drink-drive limit the next morning.

Only time can remove alcohol from your bloodstream; black coffee, cold showers and fresh air won’t sober you up.

Drinks poured at home are often more generous than pub measures

It takes one hour for your liver to remove one unit of alcohol

The legal drink-drive limit cannot be accurately converted into a number of units

If you drink heavily in the evening you may still be over the drink-drive limit the next morning
The risks

Everyone takes risks at some time or other and we generally weigh up the risks before deciding whether something is worth doing. People sometimes dismiss the idea that they need to think about how much they drink. But regularly drinking too much increases the risk of long-term damage to your health.

Raised blood pressure is a very common condition, especially among older people. As blood pressure rises so does the risk of ill health, in particular of coronary heart disease and some kinds of stroke.

Drinking alcohol raises blood pressure. In general, the more you drink the more your blood pressure will go up.

Regularly drinking more than the daily benchmarks also increases your risk of liver damage, cirrhosis of the liver, and cancers of the mouth and throat. Some studies have suggested a slight association between alcohol consumption and breast cancer but this is still uncertain. The risk of mouth and throat cancer is higher if you drink heavily and also smoke.

People who drink very heavily may also develop psychological and emotional problems, including depression.