A drink or two may help you to relax and socialise and it may even do you some good, but regularly overdoing it, is associated with various health risks. Sensible drinking involves knowing what your limits are and being aware of how much you’re drinking and your pattern of alcohol use. It’s important to understand how to drink sensibly to enjoy alcohol in moderation as part of a healthy lifestyle.

**About Alcohol**

Drinking within safe limits is unlikely to do you any harm and it’s even been suggested that for certain people, a small amount of alcohol – that is about one or two units of alcohol a day – may be good for your heart.

But in truth, there are more effective ways to protect your heart, including eating a healthy balanced diet and taking regular exercise.

If you regularly drink too much alcohol, not only do you risk your health, but depending on how much and how often you drink, your work and relationships may also be affected.

To stay safe and healthy, it pays to know your limits and drink alcohol sensibly.

**Further Advice**

**Drinkline**  
0800 917 8282 (weekdays 9am – 8pm, weekends 11am – 4pm).

**Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)**  
[www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)

**Alcohol Concern**  
020 7566 9800  
[www.alcoholconcern.org.uk](http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk)

**Al-Anon Family Groups**  
[www.al-anonuk.org.uk](http://www.al-anonuk.org.uk)

**Addaction**  
[www.addaction.org.uk](http://www.addaction.org.uk)

**Adfam**  
[www.adfam.org.uk](http://www.adfam.org.uk)

**The National Association for Children of Alcoholics (Nacoa)**  
[www.nacoa.org.uk](http://www.nacoa.org.uk)

**THINK!**  
[www.dft.gov.uk/think](http://www.dft.gov.uk/think)

**Caring for an Alcoholic**  
[www.nhs.uk/Livewell/alcohol/Pages/Caringforanalcoholic.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/alcohol/Pages/Caringforanalcoholic.aspx)
Alcohol's Effects on the Body

Drinking too much – on a single occasion or over time – can take a serious toll on your health. Here’s how alcohol can affect your body:

Brain

Alcohol interferes with the brain’s communication pathways, and can affect the way the brain looks and works. These disruptions can change mood and behaviour, and make it harder to think clearly and move with coordination.

Heart

Drinking a lot over a long time or too much on a single occasion can damage the heart, causing problems including:
- Cardiomyopathy – Stretching and drooping of heart muscle
- Arrhythmias – Irregular heart beat
- Stroke
- High blood pressure

Liver

Heavy drinking takes a toll on the liver, and can lead to a variety of problems and liver inflammations including:
- Steatosis, or fatty liver
- Alcoholic hepatitis
- Fibrosis
- Cirrhosis

Pancreas:

Alcohol causes the pancreas to produce toxic substances that can eventually lead to pancreatitis, a dangerous inflammation and swelling of the blood vessels in the pancreas that prevents proper digestion.

Cancer

Drinking too much alcohol can increase your risk of developing certain cancers, including cancers of the:
- Mouth
- Oesophagus
- Throat
- Liver
- Breast

Immune System

Drinking too much can weaken your immune system, making your body a much easier target for disease. Chronic drinkers are more likely to contract diseases like pneumonia and tuberculosis than people who do not drink too much. Drinking a lot on a single occasion slows your body’s ability to ward off infections – even up to 24 hours after getting drunk.
What are sensible drinking limits?

The Department of Health guidelines recommend not regularly drinking more than:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Per day</td>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>2-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Per week)</td>
<td>(21)</td>
<td>(14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Regularly’ means every day or most days of the week. This does not mean you can save up all the ‘allowance’ for a weekend binge. A drinking binge is generally defined as drinking double the daily recommended units in one session. Binge drinking for men, therefore, is drinking more than eight units of alcohol – or about three pints of strong beer. For women, it’s drinking more than six units of alcohol – the equivalent of two large glasses of wine. The maximum weekly consumption of alcohol for men is 21 units (168g), and for women 14 units (112g).

More recently the government has advised that these weekly consumption guidelines should be spread out across the week into daily limits, to avoid the idea that it’s fine to not drink all week, then drink your entire alcohol ‘allowance’ at the weekend. So it now becomes 3-4 units per day for men and 2-3 units per day for women.

There is some evidence to suggest that, in older people at least, there may be some health benefits from drinking in moderation – primarily from reductions in heart disease. But this should not be used as an excuse for drinking more.

Of course, these guidelines apply to healthy adults only, so the ‘safe’ levels for teenagers or adults with health problems is obviously much lower.

Why are sensible drinking limits different for women?

The recommended limits are lower for women than for men because women have different amounts of fat, muscle and water in their bodies than men. This affects the way women and men’s bodies cope with alcohol. As a result, women are more likely to develop health problems, such as liver disease, at lower levels of alcohol consumption than men.

How many units in your drink?

The UK aims to state on the label of all alcohol drinks how much alcohol they contain. This is expressed as ‘percentage alcohol by volume’ (% ABV). The packaging should also give the number of units of alcohol the drink contains.
Sensible Drinking

One unit is equal to 10ml by volume or 8g by weight, of pure alcohol – the amount of alcohol an average adult can process in one hour. The number of units of alcohol in different drinks varies, for example:

- one 25ml single measure of spirit (37.5% ABV) is equal to one unit
- a 175ml (standard) glass of red wine (12% ABV) is equal to two units
- a pint of beer (4% ABV) contains 2.3 units
- a pint of cider (4.5% ABV) contains 2.6 units

Be aware that alcoholic drinks vary in strength; for example, some wines and lagers contain more alcohol than others. What's more, bars and restaurants offer a variety of measures, such as spirits in measurements of 25, 35 or 50ml, and wine glass measurements of 125, 175 or 250ml. So, for instance, if you drink three glasses of 250ml wine, you’re drinking a whole bottle of wine and three times the recommended amount.

In fact, some research has shown that only one in eight adults keep track of their drinking and most people aren’t clear about the relationship between units, alcohol strengths and glass sizes. Another survey found that around three in 10 adults drink more than the recommended amount of alcohol on at least one day each week.

To accurately track how many units you are drinking, try this alcohol units calculator. There are also apps for your phone that can help you keep track.

www.bupa.co.uk/individuals/health-information/tools-calculators/hi-alcohol-calculator

Drinking Sensibly

Drinking sensibly doesn’t mean missing out on all the fun. The first steps are to understand how much and how often you’re drinking. Start by keeping a record of how much you drink over a week. You may find you’re drinking within your limits and don’t need to change your drinking habits. But if you’re exceeding your safe limits, think about when and where you’re drinking and how much. You may be having a glass of wine with most evening meals, a lunchtime drink once a week and a planned night out every Friday or Saturday. Remembering a few simple tips can help you drink sensibly.

- Start with low-alcohol or alcohol-free drinks, or alternate these with alcoholic drinks. You could also switch to a lower alcoholic drink.
- Pace yourself – enjoy your drink slowly. Don’t drink in rounds or you may be drinking at a much faster pace.
- Buy yourself an alcohol measure for your home so that you can see how much you’re putting in your drink. Keep track with an alcohol app when you’re out on the town.
- Instead of going to the pub or having a drink at home, try going to the gym or doing another activity you enjoy such as having a bath.
- Don’t drink alcohol every day of the week – have at least two alcohol-free days.
- Have something to eat before you drink, and if possible, while you’re drinking – this slows down how quickly your body absorbs alcohol.
Sensible Drinking

When Not to Drink?

It takes about one hour for your liver to break down one unit of alcohol. The more you drink, the longer it will take for the effects of alcohol to clear. There are times when not drinking alcohol at all is the safest choice. These include the following:

- Before you plan to drive or when you’re driving.
- Before or when you’re operating machinery or electrical equipment.
- Before or during swimming or other active sports.
- When you’re taking certain medicines – always read the patient information leaflet that comes with your medicine and ask your GP or pharmacist for advice.
- When you’re pregnant or trying for a baby. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can increase the risk of miscarriage and affect the development of your unborn baby.

These figures are too high but accidents involving drink driving have decreased hugely over the last 30 years. Deaths and serious injuries related to drink driving have fallen by more than three-quarters since 1980.

What’s the law on drink driving?

In the UK, the alcohol limit for drivers is 80 milligrammes of alcohol per 100 millilitres of blood, 35 microgrammes per 100 millilitres of breath or 107 milligrammes per 100 millilitres of urine. In most other European countries, the limit is less, usually 50 milligrammes per 100 millilitres of blood.

How much can I drink and stay under the limit?

There is no fool-proof way of drinking and staying under the limit. The amount of alcohol you would need to drink to be considered over the driving limit varies from person to person. It depends on:

- your weight
- your gender (men tend to process alcohol faster than women)
- your metabolism
- your current stress levels
- whether you’ve eaten recently
- age (younger people tend to process alcohol more slowly)

Even small amounts of alcohol can affect your ability to drive so the only safe advice is to avoid any alcohol if you are driving.

Drink driving and the legal alcohol limit

In 2010, nearly 10,000 reported road casualties happened when a driver was over the legal alcohol limit. As a result, 250 people were killed in drink driving accidents.
How alcohol affects driving

Many of the functions that we depend on to drive safely are affected when we drink alcohol:

- the brain takes longer to receive messages from the eye
- processing information becomes more difficult
- instructions to the body's muscles are delayed resulting in slower reaction times

You can also experience blurred and double vision, which affects your ability to see things clearly while you are driving. And you're more likely to take potentially dangerous risks because you can act on urges you normally repress.

How to ensure you don't drink and drive

Arrange within your group of friends who's going to be the designated driver. A designated driver is the person who abstains from alcohol on a night out so they can drive the rest of their group of friends home safely.

If you live somewhere with good public transport links – take advantage of them. If you're planning on staying out beyond the last train, tube or bus, make sure you've got a couple of taxi numbers.

If you have no option but to drive, stick to zero alcohol beers, mocktails or standard soft drinks.

Not every night out has to involve a bar or pub - book a table at a restaurant or try one of our alcohol-free nights on the town ideas.

More information on drink driving:

Is it safe to drive the morning after drinking?  
www.drinkaware.co.uk/check-the-facts/alcohol-and-the-law/can-i-drive-the-morning-after-drinking-alcohol/

Think! Road Safety campaign website  
www.dft.gov.uk/think

The Institute of Alcohol Studies’ factsheet on Drinking and Driving  
www.ias.org.uk/resources/factsheets/drink-driving.pdf

Directgov - information on drink driving penalties  
www.direct.gov.uk/en/TravelAndTransport/Highwaycode/DG_069870

Alcohol and accidents  
www.drinkaware.co.uk/check-the-facts/effects-on-your-safety/alcohol-related-accidents/

www.drinkaware.co.uk/make-a-change/how-to-cut-down/cutting-down-when-out-and-about/alcohol-free-nights-on-the-town/
How to know when you have a problem

If you are unsure whether you have a problem ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you tend to drink the same amount each day, regardless of circumstances or moods, and may feel quite cheated if you do not get your ‘quota’?
- Do you miss appointments or deadlines, break promises and re-arrange events, so that you can freely consume alcohol?
- Do you need more and more alcohol to do the same job/ stay “sane” or cope?
- Do you suffer from withdrawal symptoms after a heavy night such as nausea, anxiety and tremors?
- Do you find the thought of drinking difficult to resist?
- Has anyone ever raised concern that you may be drinking too much?

If you answered “yes” to any of the questions above and you regularly exceed the recommended weekly alcohol limit, you may benefit from talking to your GP or a relevant health professional.

The Priory offering a free addiction assessment at their clinics www.priorygroup.com/free-addiction-assessment

Residential Rehabilitation

Most people receive their support to stop drinking in the community. Some need a short stay in a unit with access to 24-hour medical care so they can receive adequate assistance with their withdrawal symptoms or other problems.

This may be an NHS hospital ward or medical unit, or a residential rehabilitation service, depending on the situation.

The best results from residential rehab are achieved when participants stay for at least 12 weeks. Residential rehab is usually reserved for people with medium or high levels of alcohol dependence, particularly those who have received other forms of help that have not been successful.

Days are usually structured, with a combination of one-to-one counselling and group therapy, as well as some chosen activities, such as art therapy, sport, life skills, cooking, financial management and family/couples therapy for relatives.

You may be referred to residential rehab through the NHS. It’s also possible to pay privately. Medical insurance companies may fund this for a certain period.

There are several websites that provide information on residential rehabilitation units. It’s not possible to give advice on which sites are the most useful or balanced in their approach. Use the NHS Choices Find Services directory, to find support for alcohol addiction in your area for you or someone you know.