



(ALCOFACTS)

A guide to responsible drinking



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(what is alcohol ?)

Alcohol is part of our culture. Many of us drink alcohol on all sorts of occasions and for all sorts of reasons. **A small amount** of alcohol does little or no harm and can be enjoyable.

This booklet explains what you need to know about alcohol, and how, for those who choose to drink/consume alcohol, to drink it responsibly.

What is alcohol?

Before you can make decisions about your use of alcohol, you need to know the facts. Alcohol may make you feel lively and talkative, and small amounts may make you feel relaxed, but:

- alcohol is a depressant drug
- alcohol can make you aggressive and argumentative
- drinking large amounts on a single occasion could lead to a coma and even death
- alcohol dehydrates the body and lowers blood sugar levels
- alcohol is associated with a range of physical and mental health risks, as well as being a factor in a variety of social harm issues, for example, community problems, drink driving, fatal fires, violence and crimes.

Why do we drink alcohol?

- 'I like the taste.'
- 'It helps me to relax.'
- 'You need alcohol to make a party go with a swing.'
- 'I like alcohol to celebrate something.'
- 'It's part of our culture; weddings, parties, and where would our communities be without pubs?'
- 'I need a drink after a hard day's work.'
- 'Drinking helps me to feel less lonely and bored.'
- 'I like a drink after a game.'
- 'It's sociable; I like it.'
- 'It helps me block out/forget my feelings.'

Alcohol is part of a way of life for most people. It can be enjoyable. It can help us to socialise and celebrate. **But there is a downside.**

Drinking too much can cause serious conditions which **can be fatal**. There were 2,365 alcohol-related deaths, and 1,399 deaths in which alcohol was the underlying cause, in Scotland in 2007.



Facts and figures about alcohol in Scotland:

- 65% of people questioned see alcohol abuse as a big social problem
- 43% of people questioned report that other people being drunk or rowdy in a public place has an effect on their own quality of life
- 42,430 alcohol-related discharges from general hospitals (involving 28,586 patients) took place in Scotland in the year 2007–2008
- 6,702 offences of drunkenness were recorded in the year 2007–2008
- A recent audit found that alcohol was a contributory factor in 11% of all A&E attendances; 70% of assaults attending A&E are estimated to be alcohol-related
- 22% of the accused in homicide cases in 2007–2008 were drunk, an additional 14% were drunk and on drugs at the time of the alleged offence, and only 13% were reported *not* to have been under the influence of either alcohol or drugs
- 49% of prisoners in Scottish prisons said that they were drunk at the time of their offence
- 63% of men and women who had experienced partner abuse/force involved the perpetrator having been drinking on at least one occasion.

(alcohol consumption)

Alcohol consumption has a cost to the taxpayer and to the economy.

- Every year alcohol misuse costs NHS Scotland over £405 million in treatment.
- Every year, the total cost of alcohol misuse in Scotland is estimated to be £2.25 billion, taking into account costs to NHS Scotland, social work services, criminal justice and fire services, wider economic costs and human/social costs.

If you drink at all, you are affected by alcohol. Generally, if you drink moderately and not too often, the risks are very small.

- So what does drinking 'a little' mean?
- What is 'in moderation'?
- How much is responsible?
- What are the limits?
- How can you tell how much you are drinking?

The amount of pure alcohol in a drink is important. Different drinks contain different amounts of alcohol. They are measured in **UNITS** and **one unit** can vary depending on the size of the measure or the percentage volume. Percentage volume of alcohol has increased in recent years, and spirits and wine in particular are often sold in pubs in larger measures than in the past. The amount you may pour for yourself when drinking at home may be different from this amount – often more.



How many units in your drink?

DRINK	USUAL/AVERAGE SIZE OF MEASURE	USUAL/AVERAGE PERCENTAGE VOLUME	UNITS
Spirits (whisky, gin, vodka)	Usual/average size of measure 25ml (single pub measure)	40.0% abv	1.0
Spirits (whisky, gin, vodka)	35ml (usual Scottish single pub measure)	40.0% abv	1.4
Fortified wine (sherry, martini, port)	50ml (small glass)	17.0% abv	0.9
Wine	125ml glass	12.5% abv	1.6
Wine	175ml (usual current 'small' or 'standard glass' pub measure)	12.5% abv	2.2
Wine	250ml (current 'large glass' pub measure)	12.5% abv	3.1
Beer, lager or cider (normal strength)	Half pint (284ml)	4.0% abv	1.1
Beer, lager or cider (normal strength)	Small can/bottle (330ml)	4.5% abv	1.5
Beer, lager or cider (normal strength)	Large can/bottle (440ml)	4.5% abv	2.0
Beer, lager or cider (medium strength)	Half pint (284ml)	5.0% abv	1.4
Beer, lager or cider (medium strength)	Small can/bottle (330ml)	5.0% abv	1.7
Beer, lager or cider (medium strength)	Large can/bottle (440ml)	5.0% abv	2.2
Beer, lager or cider (strong)	Half pint (284ml)	6.5% abv	1.8
Beer, lager or cider (strong)	Small can/bottle (330ml)	6.5% abv	2.1
Beer, lager or cider (strong)	Large can/bottle (440ml)	6.5% abv	2.9
Alcopops/coolers	Bottle (275ml)	5.0% abv	1.4

Remember

1 pint normal strength beer/lager/cider = 1/2 pint strong beer/lager/cider = 1 standard glass wine = 2 small pub measures of spirits = 2 units

(know your limit !)

What are the responsible drinking limits?

You can work out how much you drink, and stay within your limits, by counting up the units. In general, drinking in moderation (within responsible drinking guidelines) is unlikely to be hazardous to health. Drinking more than this, however, carries a progressive health risk as well as risks associated with occasional episodes of excessive drinking. The guidelines for responsible drinking, based on maximum units of alcohol, are based on this and are as follows:

Men

No more than 3–4 units in a day and no more than 21 units in a week, with at least two alcohol-free days each week.

Women

No more than 2–3 units in a day and no more than 14 units in a week, with at least two alcohol-free days each week.

The daily guidelines are very important due to the health and other effects of excessive drinking. Remember – tolerance does not protect from harm.

If you are pregnant or trying to become pregnant, you should not drink any alcohol at all. There is no known safe level of alcohol consumption in pregnancy.

If you are breastfeeding, it is important to limit the amount of alcohol you drink to no more than 1–2 units once or twice a week.



General advice

If you drink within responsible drinking guidelines, there is unlikely to be any significant health risk. However, the effects of alcohol build up through drinking too much over time as well as from drinking too much in one episode. It's important to know that most people who suffer from alcohol-related health problems are those who drink heavily – at or above responsible drinking levels – over time, or have frequent episodes of drinking at or above this level. Tolerance does not protect you from harm.

Problems which can result from prolonged use of alcohol can include:

- weight gain
- skin problems
- sexual difficulties and fertility problems
- a range of physical and mental health problems outlined later in this booklet
- family and work problems.

There is some research which suggests that, in middle-aged people who drink already, there may even be some benefits from drinking small amounts, for example in the prevention of coronary heart disease. For middle-aged men, drinking one or two units of alcohol a day may help prevent this disease and for women, drinking one or two units of alcohol a week may also be beneficial as coronary heart disease is more common in post-menopausal women. However, a non-drinker should not start drinking, or an infrequent drinker increase their drinking, simply to benefit their heart. There are other strategies which have fewer harmful side effects, and drinking large quantities outweighs any benefits.

See section **Women and drinking** for details of drinking alcohol when pregnant and breastfeeding.

There are situations when you definitely should not drink:

- before you plan to drive or when you drive
- before or when you are operating machinery, mechanical equipment or electrical equipment
- when you are at work
- before or during swimming or other active sports
- if you are taking certain medicines, because the effects of alcohol can be very dangerous if mixed with other drugs – check with your doctor
- if your doctor advises you not to drink at all.

(drinking and driving)

Recent statistics show that about 1,060 people are injured and 50 people are killed in Scotland every year as a result of drinking and driving. On average, 740 accidents in Scotland each year involve the driver/rider having an illegal alcohol level. (These figures are 2002–2006 averages).

Recent statistics show that there were 10,697 drink-driving offences in Scotland in the year 2007–2008.

What is the legal limit?

UK law says that it is an offence to drive with more than 80 mg of alcohol in every 100 ml of blood, but the level in most European countries is 50 mg.

But how does drink affect you?

There is no simple answer to this question. How alcohol affects you depends a lot on your age, gender, whether or not you have eaten anything and if you are taking other drugs. It's best just not to drink at all if you are going to drive.

Can you tell if you are safe to drive?

You can't. Alcohol affects your mind. It makes you feel more confident, so you are less likely to make a balanced decision about whether or not to drive. It also

reduces your inhibitions so you may be more likely to take risks and to react violently when you are driving.

How does alcohol affect driving?

Alcohol slows down the brain and so:

- **your ability to concentrate is reduced**
- **your ability to judge speed and distance, and to deal with the unexpected, is impaired**
- **your reaction time is slower**
- **your vision and awareness become blurred, especially in the dark**
- **you can lose muscle control and coordination.**

All this means that you are far more likely to have an accident.



It's important to remember

Drinking and driving doesn't just affect you – you can cause untold damage to other people's lives. Only time can clear the bloodstream of alcohol.

Attitudes towards drinking and driving have hardened over the years. Mass media campaigns have been used to reinforce the anti-drink driving message, and evidence suggests that public tolerance of drink-driving has been steadily declining. For example, 4 out of 5 people believe that you should not be allowed to drink any alcohol before driving. Drinking any alcohol can, in fact, reduce or impair your ability to drive. This has been reflected in harsher legal penalties being awarded for drink-driving offences.

Remember that you might still be over the limit the morning after a heavy bout of drinking.

(women and drinking)

Why are responsible drinking limits different for women?

Women are more readily affected by alcohol than men.

The body can be divided into watery and fatty areas. Proportionally women have less water and more fat than men and alcohol is absorbed into the watery areas. Women will usually get drunk faster than men do on the same amount. Women will also feel the effects for longer and are more likely to risk liver damage with heavy drinking.





If you are pregnant or breastfeeding...

As there is no known safe level of alcohol consumption in pregnancy, if you are pregnant or trying to become pregnant, you should not drink any alcohol at all.

- Even small quantities of alcohol can harm your baby, because alcohol passes from your bloodstream to the baby, across the placenta.
- It's not just mothers with a serious drink problem who risk having a baby with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD). FASD can include physical, behavioural, emotional and learning abnormalities due to damage to the brain and central nervous system caused by the mother drinking during pregnancy. Even small quantities may cause harm to babies (as there is no known safe level) and FASD is completely preventable by avoiding alcohol during pregnancy.
- When you drink, small amounts of alcohol pass into your breast milk. For this reason, it is important to limit the amount of alcohol you drink to no more than 1–2 units once or twice a week. Drinking more than this can affect the baby's development and cause feeding, sleeping and digesting problems. Alcohol can also affect your milk supply. If it's a special occasion and you know you are going to have a drink, consider expressing your milk in advance. To be on the safe side, you may want to avoid alcohol altogether while you are breastfeeding.

(young people and drinking)

Why do young people drink?

- ‘It looks grown up.’
- ‘All my mates drink, so I want to join them.’
- ‘It’s fun; you have to take risks, don’t you?’
- ‘There’s nothing else to do round here.’
- ‘It relaxes me for sex.’

What do we know about young people and drinking?

Young people in Scotland report higher levels of drinking and drunkenness than in other parts of Europe.

Most young people drink alcohol without experiencing serious harm. However, there are risks for young people under the influence of alcohol.

Young people of both sexes are more likely to suffer the effects of alcohol because most won’t be used to drinking. They are more likely than others to have unplanned and unprotected sex, thus risking pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections. Drinking is

also associated with sexual assault and rape.

Accidents are the major cause of death among young people and alcohol is estimated to be a contributory factor in 20–30% of all accidents.

Young, inexperienced drivers are over-represented in deaths from drink-driving. Nearly one-third of pedestrians aged 16–19 killed in accidents had been drinking.

What about alcopops?

There are many flavoured alcoholic drinks available in the UK. Many have an alcohol content which is stronger than most beers – some of them are much stronger. As the sweetness of these drinks makes it difficult to taste and judge the alcoholic content, they provide an easy introduction to alcohol for young people.

The producers of alcopops argue that they are aiming at 18- to 25-year-olds. Findings from some surveys suggest that the increase in drinking by those 16 years and under – particularly young women – is partly accounted for by the introduction of alcopops on to the market.



What is the law on young people and drinking?

Some new legislation on alcohol is coming into force in 2009. Also, a consultation on alcohol, including the legalities, has recently been completed by the Scottish Government which may result in further changes in legislation. Currently it is against the law:

- **for a person under 18 to drink alcohol in a bar**
- **for a licensee to sell alcohol to a person under 18, with the exception that young people over 16 can buy beer, wine or cider with a meal in a room or an area used for meals in a public house or hotel.**

From 2009, all young people must provide proof of age in all licensed premises before being served. It will be illegal for people under 18 to buy or be sold alcohol in any circumstances other than when eating a meal in licensed premises. Buying alcohol for anyone under 18 commits an offence punishable by a fine and/or prison sentence.

In some areas, by-laws exist which ban anyone from drinking in the street.

(effects of alcohol)

Immediate effects:

- nausea
- vomiting
- headaches
- hangovers (including tiredness, inability to concentrate and mood control problems)
- accidents and getting into fights
- risk of death through accidents, through acute alcohol poisoning, or through inhaling vomit while you are unconscious.

Effects on mental health can include:

- anxiety
- insomnia
- depression
- attempted suicide
- suicide.

Social and community level effects:

- criminal damage
- unwanted pregnancy
- family arguments
- child neglect
- child abuse
- domestic violence.

Long-term effects:

Drinking can cause serious damage. Your liver can only burn one unit in one hour. If it has to cope with too much over a number of years, it will be damaged, for example, through liver disease, hepatitis and/or cirrhosis. Most people who suffer from alcohol-related health problems are those who drink heavily over a number of years rather than alcoholics.

Too much drinking can also cause:

- stomach disorders like ulcers and gastritis
- cancer of the mouth, throat and gullet
- brain damage
- sexual difficulties
- high blood pressure
- muscle disease
- increased risks of other illnesses, for example, breast cancer, coronary heart disease and stroke
- problems with the nervous system like pain in the legs and arms.

Effects on mental health can include:

- suicide
- personality changes
- fits
- depression and other mental health problems.

Social effects can include:

- family problems
- work problems.



What about hangovers?

Hangovers are caused by alcohol – it irritates the stomach and dehydrates the body. The main problem is that the alcohol in your drink tends to make the water move out of the cells in your body and move into the blood. Most alcoholic drinks contain additives which give them their flavour, colour and taste. These additives add to the hangover. Different drinks contain different levels of additives; vodka has very few additives, for example, while red wine, port and brandy have lots.

Alcohol and weight gain

Alcohol is loaded with calories which go straight to the bloodstream. Heavy drinkers can be overweight and yet suffer from malnourishment because they have replaced food with alcohol and are not getting essential nutrients and vitamins. Alcohol can add to the problems of diabetics.

One pint of beer or 1 large glass of wine or 1 alcopop = 200 calories

(effects of alcohol)

How alcohol affects you depends on your body weight, your gender, how quickly you drink, the length of time since your last meal, and whether or not you are taking other drugs.

Some questions to ask yourself if you drink alcohol regularly

- How does drinking affect you?
- How does your drinking affect your family, friends and others?
- How much does it cost you each week?
- How many units do you drink each day?
- Do you know the health risks if you drink more than the recommended responsible limits?
- What reasons would you give if someone asked you why you drank alcohol?
- Do you need to cut down?
- When you serve or offer drinks at home, do you have soft drinks or low-alcohol alternatives?

The following are responsible drinking guidelines for everyone

- Drink and think in units.
- Keep a drinking diary for each day of the week — it will help you to understand your own drinking pattern.
- Pace yourself — enjoy a drink slowly. You don't have to join in with every round.
- Alternate alcoholic drinks with water or alcohol-free drinks.
- Try drinking low-alcohol and alcohol-free drinks.
- Not everyone drinks alcohol: it's OK to say no.
- Treat yourself — if you manage to keep to your limits!
- Have at least two alcohol-free days each week.

Have something to eat before you drink, and if possible, while you are drinking. Alcohol is absorbed in the stomach. If there is food there already, it will provide a lining for the stomach to lessen the irritation of alcohol on the stomach. To minimise the likelihood of a hangover:

- follow **the responsible drinking guidelines**
- don't mix drinks
- stick to one unit per hour
- have a pint of water as your last drink.

Keep a glass of water beside your bed to sip during the night if need be.

Get help if you think that your drinking is slipping out of control – don't be afraid to ask your doctor or other health professional.



Remember

- Nearly all the alcohol you drink will be burnt up by the liver; the rest is disposed of by either sweat or urine.
- On average it takes about one hour for your body to break down one unit of alcohol.
- Only time will sober you up – not coffee.



(useful contacts)

If you are concerned about your own drinking or that of a family member, you can seek advice from your doctor or other health professional, or from your local alcohol advice centre.

NHS Health Scotland

Woodburn House
Canaan Lane
Edinburgh
EH10 4SG

T: 0131 536 5500

www.healthscotland.com

Resources are also available in libraries of local health boards and health promotion departments, contact your local NHS Board for details.

Alcohol Focus Scotland

2nd Floor
166 Buchanan Street
Glasgow
G1 2LW

T: 0141 572 6700

www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk

National charitable body concerned with all aspects of alcohol use and misuse in Scotland. There is a local network of councils on alcohol throughout Scotland.

Alcoholics Anonymous

50 Wellington Street,
Glasgow G2 6HJ

Central services

T: 0141 226 2214

Helpline (24 hours)

T: 0845 769 7555

AI-Anon Information Centre

Mansfield Park Building Unit 6
22 Mansfield Street
Partick
Glasgow
G11 5QP

T: 0141 339 8884

Helpline (10am to 10pm)





To work out the number of units of alcohol in a can or bottle when this is not given on the label, follow these steps:



1. Multiply the % alcohol content by the volume of liquid.
2. Divide by: 100 if volume is stated in centilitres (cls) or;
3. Divide by: 1000 if volume is stated in millilitres (mls).

The result is the number of units of alcohol in the can or bottle, for example:

A 75 cl bottle of wine with an alcohol content of 11.5%;
 $11.5 \text{ multiplied by } 75 \text{ and divided by } 100 = 8.8 \text{ units.}$

A 75 cl bottle of wine with an alcohol content of 14.5%;
 $14.5 \text{ multiplied by } 75 \text{ and divided by } 100 = 10.9 \text{ units.}$

A 70 cl bottle of vodka at 40%;
 $40 \text{ multiplied by } 70 \text{ and divided by } 100 = 28 \text{ units.}$

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