

Alcohol Support and Information

Sensible Drinking



Is this booklet for you?

This booklet looks at how alcohol affects the body and offers suggestions for drinking more safely and staying healthy. It's for people who are concerned that they may be drinking more than is safe and sensible.

However, if you are already experiencing serious problems because of your drinking then it's time to get in touch with your GP, Fife Alcohol Support Service or Tayside Council on Alcohol (contact details at the back of this booklet).

Why should I control my drinking?

Many of us don't realise that we're over the limit on a night out and that the amount we're drinking could be harming us. Although a lot of people enjoy alcohol without coming to harm, about one in six of us are at risk of developing an alcohol-related problem at some point in our lives.

You don't have to be an 'alcoholic' to have a drinking problem. In fact, most people with drinking problems are not what we would call 'alcoholics'. Anyone can experience a drink related problem regardless of age, sex, career or lifestyle.

How much can I safely drink?

Do you know how much you drink? Maybe you have a feeling you're probably drinking too much, but you're not sure? Health experts recommend that men and women drink no more than 14 units of alcohol per week.

It is recommended that your 14 units is spread evenly across the week and that you have regular drink free days.

Drinking your weekly quota in only one or two sessions will be harmful to your health. One unit of alcohol = half a pint of ordinary strength beer or lager (3.5% ABV) or a 25cl measure of whisky, gin or rum. Remember that alcohol content can vary a lot in drinks like lagers and wines. Please see our unit and calorie leaflet for a breakdown of drinks and units.

You can also use the drink diary on the FASS website:
www.fassaction.org.uk

Could I develop an alcohol problem?

The only guaranteed way of avoiding problems is not to drink. However, if you do drink, it can help to become more aware of your drinking and to recognise the warning signs. Have a look at these high risk situations and answer the questions honestly.

	Yes	No
I regularly drink more than the sensible limits		
I spend all or most of my free time in the company of heavy drinkers		
I order or pour extra drinks for myself when in company		
I've had trouble with the law as a result of drinking		
I have lots of arguments with family/friends about my drinking		
I need to take time off work or turn up late due to drinking		
I drink in the mornings to 'cure' hangovers		
I drink to cope with feelings like sadness, anxiety or sleeplessness		
I drink to cope with problems at home or work		
I can't stop drinking until I'm drunk		
I'm starting to drink more frequently		
I have blackouts or memory loss after drinking		
I often drink on my own		

Have you answered 'yes' to any of these questions and feel concerned about your drinking? Get in touch with us and we'll help you find the right support.

How does alcohol pass through the body?

Have you ever wondered where the alcohol goes once you've drunk it? Here's an example:

Julie goes out to the pub with her friends and over the course of the evening, she drinks three regular 175ml pub glasses of red wine. Each contains about two units of alcohol. As she drinks, the alcohol is absorbed through her stomach wall and into her blood where it waits until her liver can deal with it.

Julie's liver can only process about one unit of alcohol per hour. The exact length of time it takes depends on the amount of enzymes in her liver and how healthy it is, and this varies from person to person. Julie's liver will process 95% of the alcohol and a tiny amount of alcohol will escape from her body through her breath and urine.

Julie has been in the pub for two hours and has finished her third glass of wine, which amounts to six units. At this stage she is becoming merry and she may also be a bit clumsy and acting on impulse. Since Julie's liver can only process one unit per hour, her body has absorbed all six units but her liver has only processed two.

Until Julie's liver can deal with it, her blood spreads the remaining four units of alcohol throughout her body, affecting her brain and other tissues. It will take another four hours before her liver will finish processing the rest of the alcohol.

There are other factors involved in how fast Julie's body absorbed the alcohol. She didn't have a full meal before going out drinking. If she'd had a balanced meal, her body would have absorbed the wine more slowly than drinking it on an empty stomach.

Julie's body is absorbing the alcohol faster than her liver can process it. Since the processing part is slow, Julie needs to pace her drinking to prevent it building up in her body.

If Julie drinks any more, she is putting herself and her body at risk. Read on to find out how alcohol affects your body.

How does alcohol affect the brain and body?

1. Lowered inhibitions

You might notice that after you've had a couple of drinks that you're chatty and confident. This is because alcohol suppresses some of our brain functions and in small amounts can make us feel stimulated because it lowers our inhibitions.

However the more we drink, and the further we block out our nervous tissue functions, we show the classic symptoms of being drunk like slurred speech, unsteady balance, different perceptions and an inability to react quickly.

2. Dulled senses

The way we process information from our senses gets slowed down too, which means after a few drinks we have trouble seeing, smelling, touching and tasting. As well as this our pain threshold gets higher because we're more cut off from our senses.

3. Impaired judgement

Drinking too much at a time makes us lose control of our 'normal' social behaviour. Our thought processes are affected so we're no longer able to use good judgement or think clearly. That's why people act differently when they are drunk and often make decisions that they later regret.

4. Memory loss

Have you ever woken up after a night of drinking and couldn't remember parts of the evening until someone else reminded you? This happens because alcohol affects the brain's ability to make and retain memories.

More worryingly, some people experience complete blackouts and even when reminded, the memories don't come back. This is because their brain was unable to complete the process for making a memory. They have lost a gap of time and will never get it back.

5. Exaggerated emotions

Alcohol also affects the part of our brain that controls our emotions so it gives us exaggerated emotions like elation, anger and sadness. This puts us (and the people around us who are drinking) at risk of getting into arguments and becoming aggressive or violent.

6. Loss of balance and co-ordination

Alcohol affects our movements and makes us lose co-ordination. It disrupts our sense of balance, so if you've drunk more alcohol than your body can process, you will lose your balance a lot. At this stage, you might be described as 'falling down drunk'.

7. Alcohol poisoning

The brain stem controls all the bodily functions we don't have to think about like breathing, heart rate, temperature and consciousness. When alcohol starts to affect your brain stem, you'll start to feel sleepy and may fall unconscious. If the alcohol content in your body is high enough this can be fatal as your breathing will slow down or even stop completely.

8. Accidents

If you drink, you'll know that minor accidents happen all the time. On a night out you may find yourself bumping into things more often or tripping up and so on. But alcohol is also the cause of more serious accidents too. As we've seen, alcohol affects our judgement, senses, reactions, concentration, balance, co-ordination and it makes us drowsy.

So it's no surprise that alcohol is a major cause of accidents and accidental injury in the home, on the roads, in workplaces or during leisure time. It's also one of the main causes of falls, collisions, drowning and fires.

9. Illness

Alcohol irritates the lining of the stomach and intestine which can cause sickness. It reduces the blood flow to our muscles which can give us muscle ache, a classic symptom of a hangover.

Alcohol also increases blood flow to the skin causing us to sweat and look flushed. From sweating we can lose heat and our body temperature may fall below normal. Going out into cold weather for any length of time from a warm pub or club can put you at harm and at risk of hypothermia, so make sure you wrap up!



Health problems related to alcohol

There are many health problems that can develop as a result of drinking too much alcohol. Some of these include:

Sleep problems - Although alcohol can help us to fall asleep, it stops us from going into deep sleep, which we need to feel refreshed and alert. Even small amounts of alcohol can affect sleep.

Early ageing - When we get dehydrated and don't sleep properly our skin and hair gets damaged. Alcohol also expands blood vessels, causing threaded veins.

Weight gain - Alcohol can be high in calories, for example four pints of beer (3.6% abv) in a day amounts to 700 calories. This is over a third of a man's recommended daily intake of calories. A single 175ml glass of wine can contain 200 calories.

Fertility and impotence - Alcohol can reduce male fertility by lowering sperm counts and testosterone levels. More than 80% of men who drink heavily are believed to have serious sexual side effects, including impotence, sterility or loss of sexual desire.

Lack of vitamins - Alcohol can suppress the appetite and give us energy but drinking without eating meals has a direct effect on the balance of vitamins in the body. This can cause a lot of health problems.

Liver disease - Heavy drinking can cause fatty liver, hepatitis, cirrhosis and cancer of the liver.

Mental health problems - Although alcohol can lift our mood in the short term, it's a depressant drug, which can cause anxiety and depression.

Other health risks - More generally, drinking just a bit more than you should over time, can seriously harm your liver. Binge drinking especially is a risk factor in developing heart disease and alcohol is the leading cause of throat and mouth cancer, second only to tobacco.

Alcohol is also linked to bowel and liver cancer. Drinking too much can also cause bone disease, stroke, inflammation of the pancreas, an irritable stomach and type 2 diabetes.

A note for women

Women's bodies absorb and process alcohol differently to men as they have a higher blood alcohol concentration. This increases the risk of liver disease, heart muscle damage and brain damage.

Drinking alcohol just before and during your menstrual cycle can make you feel more drunk than you normally would. This is because your metabolism slows down, which causes the alcohol to stay in your bloodstream for longer. If you can, try to avoid alcohol during this time.

Pregnant women should not drink alcohol. The latest research suggests that even small amounts may cause harm and can result in a baby born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. This condition affects a child's mental and physical development.

Drinking and driving

Do you know that some people fail a breathalyser test 12 hours after stopping drinking? Even if we just reach the legal limit for driving, our reactions are slower and we have less self control.

The legal limit for driving isn't measured by units but instead blood alcohol content. This varies depending on your weight and whether you're male or female.

There's no 'safe' amount to drink before driving because it is so hard to tell what effect the alcohol will have. So it's best not to drink at all if driving. Get a bus or taxi or take turns with friends to be sober and drive.

Some facts about drinking and driving:

- One in five motorists in Scotland are killed each year because they are over the legal limit.
- You're five times more likely to be involved in an accident at the legal limit than if sober.
- About 7,000 drivers are convicted of drink driving in Scotland each year.

Some tips for cutting down on your drinking

Here are some tips to help you have a great night without the sore head or regrets in the morning.

Plan ahead. It helps to plan how much you're going to drink and over how many hours. Decide how long you will make each drink last. Here's an example:

Pete plans to drink four units (two pints) tonight. He's going out at 9pm and coming back at 11pm, which is two hours. He works out that this allows him to drink one pint every 60 minutes.

Does 60 minutes sound too long to make your drink last? Try some of these tips:

Pace yourself. Take smaller sips and sip less often. If the drink is in your hand, you're likely to drink it faster, so try putting your glass down on the table or bar after each sip. Don't leave your drink unattended in a pub or club! If you do so, then don't drink from it again – get another one.

Do something else that will distract you. Go for a meal, play some pool, get absorbed in conversation with your friends or go dancing. You'll forget about the booze and end up having a great night (and the bonus is you'll have good memories in the morning!).

Copy the slow drinker. Is there someone who you're out with who drinks slower than you do? Try to drink at the same pace as them and don't pick up your glass until they do.

Enjoy your drink. Choose drinks for their flavour not their 'kick'. Savour the taste and don't just knock it back.

Change your drink. Drinks that remind you of heavy drinking days will give you the urge to drink like that again. Try a lower strength beer for a change. Be adventurous and try something new but be aware of the strength of what you're drinking.

Add more mixer to spirits. If you drink spirits, try a different one and make it a long drink with tonic or orange. The longer the drink, the slower the rate of your drinking.

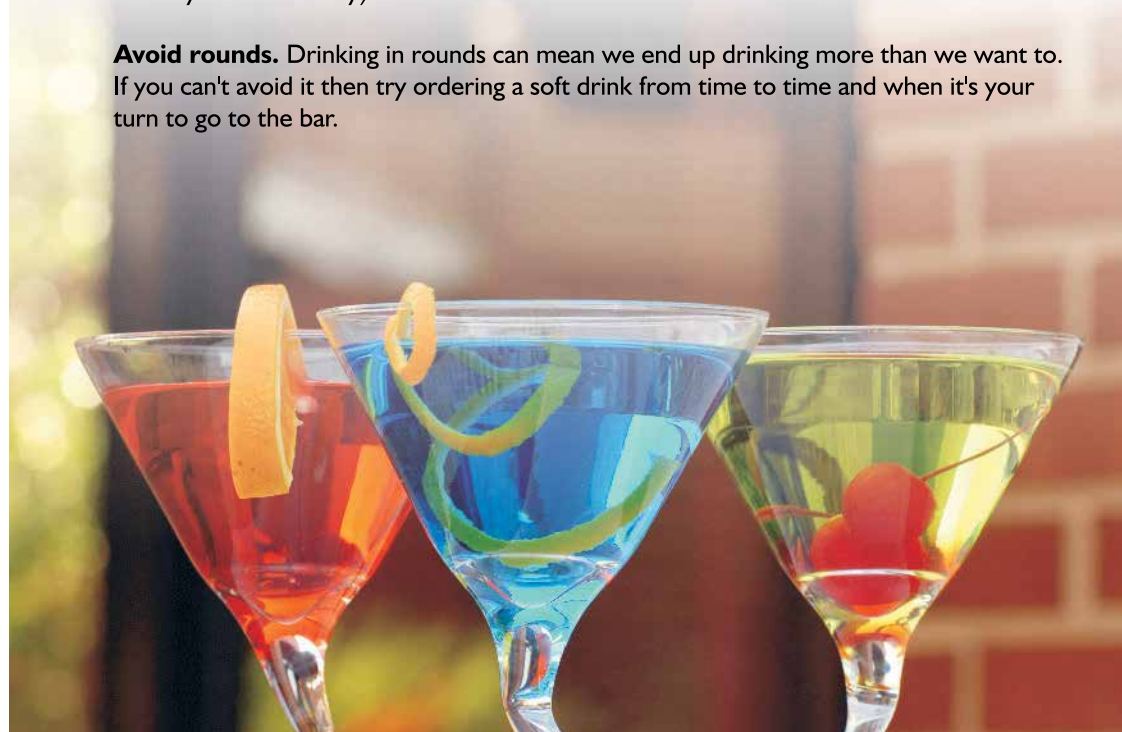
Eat before you drink. Food helps absorb alcohol so have a nice meal before you go out to the pubs/clubs - it'll give you more energy to enjoy yourself too.

Use 'spacers'. If you can, try to have 'spacers' (soft drinks) in between alcoholic drinks. It'll stop you getting dehydrated and you'll have less of a hangover in the morning.

Don't mix your drinks. Mixing your booze can make the blood alcohol concentration in your body hit the roof not to mention giving you a bad hangover. Steer clear!

Set a 'drinking budget' and stick to it. Think about how much you're going to drink before you start. Take only enough money to buy your 'quota' of drinks (and a bit more to see you home safely).

Avoid rounds. Drinking in rounds can mean we end up drinking more than we want to. If you can't avoid it then try ordering a soft drink from time to time and when it's your turn to go to the bar.



Things to remember:

Drinking coffee or having a shower doesn't make you sober. It can help you stay awake but it won't get rid of the alcohol in your system – only your liver can do that! The only thing that gets alcohol out of your system is **time**.

Choose at least two alcohol free days per week. Your liver works hard to remove the alcohol so give it a decent rest for **at least two days** in the week.

Avoid mixing alcohol with medications. Mixing booze with medication can be dangerous as it can change the effects of the medication, the alcohol or both.

General safety message

If you look after yourself in a general sense, you'll probably keep your drinking in check as well. If you feel that you need a drink in order to feel good then it's time to talk to a counsellor.

Boost your self-confidence

A lack of self-confidence and pressure from friends can often lead to drinking too much. Take a chance on being yourself. The more confident you become with friends, the easier it becomes to make your own choices. You can choose how much you want to drink!

If you act confidently, you'll start to feel confident. Try asserting yourself a few times and you'll find it's not as scary as you think!

Get moving!

Fitness is great for confidence and self-image. Exercising also releases endorphins in our brain, making us feel happier and giving us a natural high. Doctors' recommend that we do some sort of aerobic exercise at least three times a week for 20-30 minutes a time.

What you do is up to you. Whether you're into team sports like football, softball or badminton; or like to go it alone by walking, jogging, cycling or swimming, you should be able to find something you like.

Relax

Take time to relax every day. Some ideas could be watching TV, reading a good book, having a bubble bath, listening to a meditation CD or some chilled-out music. Think about what would work for you and give it a go!

Get in touch

Help to support you or for further information in Tayside or Fife please contact us:



Fife Alcohol Support Service
www.fassaction.org.uk
01592 206200



Tayside Council on Alcohol
www.alcoholtayside.com
01382 223965

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Other national information and help available can be accessed through the following organisations

Alcohol Focus Scotland
www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous
www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk
0845 769 7555

www.drinkaware.co.uk