



(ALCOFACTS)

A guide to sensible drinking

(what is alcohol ?)

Alcohol is part of our culture. Most of us drink alcohol on all sorts of occasions and for all sorts of reasons. **A small amount** of alcohol does you no harm, can be enjoyable and may even do you some good.

This leaflet explains what you need to know about alcohol, and how, if you choose to, you can drink it sensibly.

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.

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.'





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

Drinking too much can cause serious conditions which **can be fatal**. It is estimated that about 28,000 people die every year in the UK as a result of their alcohol consumption.

Alcohol has been estimated to be a factor in:

- 30% of drownings
- 33% of accidents in the home
- 40% of incidents of domestic violence
- 44% of theft charges
- 45% of wounding and assaults
- 88% of criminal damage arrests
- at least 39% of deaths in fires
- 30% of murders.

(alcohol consumption)

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

- Every year alcohol costs the National Health Service over **£160 million** in treatment.
- Every year industry loses **£2 billion** through lost productivity, unemployment and absenteeism due to drinking alcohol.

If you drink at all, you are affected by alcohol. Generally, if you drink moderately and not too often, the risks are very small. Some experts think there may even be benefits from drinking small amounts.

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

It's how much pure alcohol there is in a drink which is important. Different drinks contain different amounts of alcohol. They are measured in **UNITS** and **one unit** is the equivalent of **one pub measure of spirits** or a **half pint of lager**, not the amount you may pour for yourself when drinking at home.



How many units in your drink?

DRINK	UNITS
1 pub measure of spirits (whisky, gin, vodka)	1
1 pub measure of fortified wine (sherry, martini, port)	1
1 glass table wine	1
1 glass or can of 'alcoholic lemonade' (alcopop)	2
1 pint of low alcohol beer	1/2
1 can of beer	1 1/2
1 pint of beer	2
1 bottle of 'super' or special lager	2 1/2
1 pint of stout, 'real ale' or strong lager	3
1 can of 'super' or special lager	4
1 bottle of table wine	7
1 litre bottle of table wine	10
1 bottle of fortified wine (sherry, martini, port)	14
1 bottle of spirits (whisky, gin, vodka)	30

Remember



1/2 pint

=



1 glass wine

= 1 pub measure of spirits = 1 Unit

(know your limit!)

What are the sensible drinking limits?

You can work out how much you drink, and stay within your limits, by counting up the units.



Men

If you drink three to four units a day, there will be no significant health risk.

Consistently drinking four or more units a day is not advised.

For men over 40, drinking one or two units of alcohol a day will help prevent coronary heart disease.

Women

If you drink two or three units a day there will be no significant health risk.

Consistently drinking three or more units a day is not advised.

For women who have been through the menopause, drinking one or two units of alcohol a day will help prevent coronary heart disease.

If you are pregnant or trying to become pregnant, you should not drink more than one or two units of alcohol, once or twice a week. Some doctors think it's best not to drink at all.



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 15,000 people are injured and 500 are killed in the UK every year as a result of drinking and driving. One in three of the drivers killed in road traffic accidents have blood alcohol levels over the legal limit.

What is the legal limit?

The law says that it is an offence to drive with more than 80mg of alcohol in every 100ml of blood. It's best just not to drink at all if you are going to drive.

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 will be reduced**
- **your ability to judge speed and distance, and to deal with the unexpected, will be impaired**
- **your reaction time will be lengthened**
- **your vision and awareness will 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

that 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 is steadily declining. This is reflected in the 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 the sensible drinking limits different for women?

Women are more readily affected by alcohol than men.

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

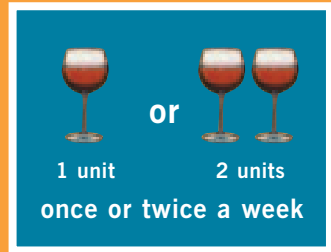
In the two or three days before a period, and during ovulation, the effects of alcohol will be felt more quickly than normal. If you are taking the contraceptive pill you do not feel this effect, but alcohol may take longer to leave your body.





If you are pregnant

- If you are pregnant or trying to become pregnant, you should not drink more than one or two units of alcohol, once or twice a week. Some doctors think it's best not to drink at all.



- If you drink when you are pregnant, you are giving the baby a drink too because alcohol passes through to the baby's bloodstream across the placenta.
- Mothers with a serious drink problem risk having a baby with physical and mental abnormalities. This is called fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS).

(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 ready 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.

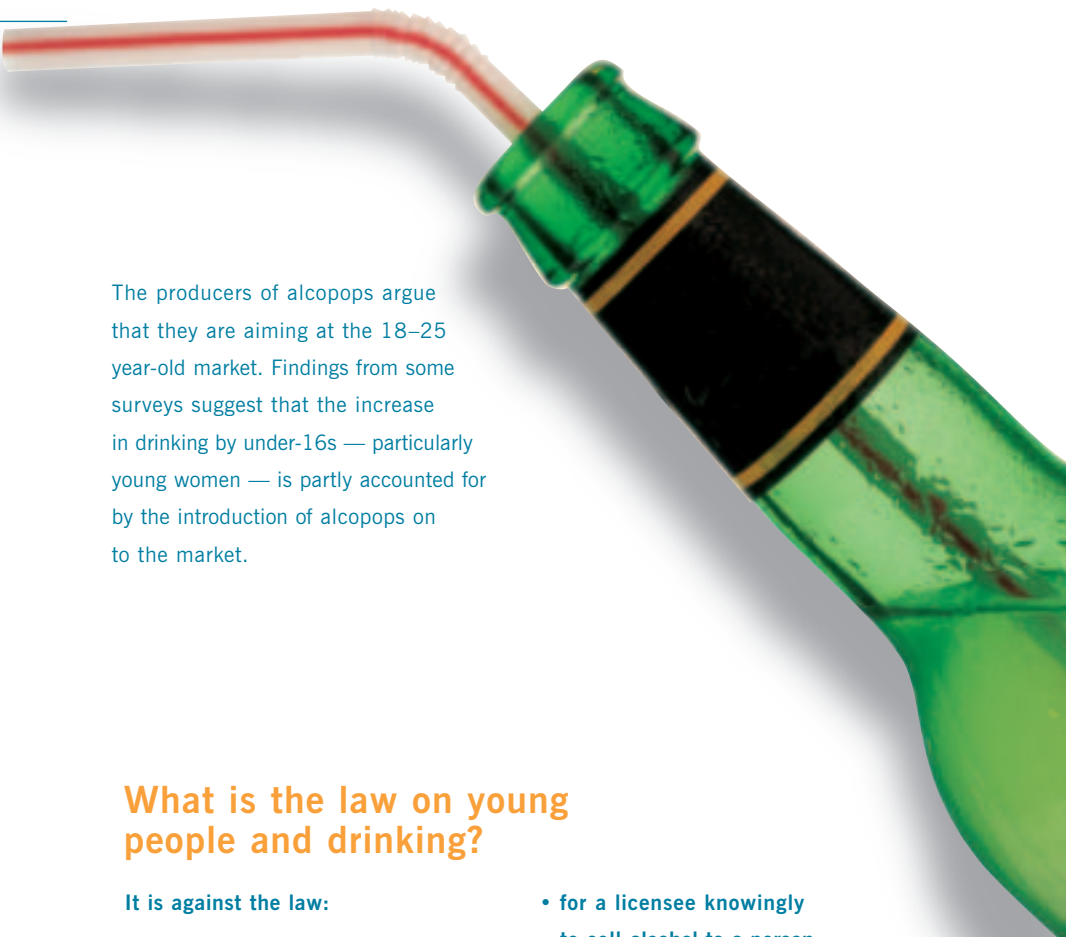
Accidents are the major cause of death among those under 30, and alcohol is estimated to be a contributory factor in 20–30% of all accidents.

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 now many alcoholic lemonades and colas available in the UK. Many have an alcohol content which is stronger than most beers — some of them are very 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 the 18–25 year-old market. Findings from some surveys suggest that the increase in drinking by under-16s — 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?

It is against the law:

- to give alcohol to a child under five except under medical supervision
- for a young person under 14 to be in a bar, unless the licensee has a children's certificate
- for a person under 18 to drink alcohol in a bar
- for a licensee knowingly to sell alcohol to a person under 18, with the exception that young people over 16 can buy beer, porter, cider or perry with a meal in a dining-room or a room used for meals in a public house or hotel.

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

(effects of alcohol)

Immediate effects:

- nausea
- vomiting
- headaches
- hangovers
- 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.

And on a social level:

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

And in the long term:

Drinking can cause serious damage. Your liver can only burn up one standard drink in one hour. If it has to cope with too much over a number of years, it will be damaged.

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
- 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. 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 (**one pint of beer = 180 calories**) which go straight to the bloodstream. Heavy drinkers can be fat 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.

(effects of alcohol)

How alcohol affects you depends upon 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 recommended sensible levels?
- 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 sensible drinking guidelines for everyone

- Drink and think in units.
- Keep a drinking diary — 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.
- 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 one or two alcohol-free days each week.



(useful organisations)

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

Health Scotland

Woodburn House
Canaan Lane
Edinburgh
EH10 4SG

T: 0131 536 5500

Local health promotion units listed under 'Health' in the phone book.

Alcoholics Anonymous

50 Wellington Street
Glasgow
G2 6HJ

Central services

T: 0141 226 2214

Helpline (24 hours)

T: 0845 769 7555

Alcohol Focus Scotland

166 Buchanan Street
Glasgow
G1 2LW

T: 0141 572 6700

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

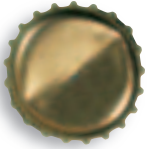


- Have something to eat before you drink, and if possible, while you are drinking. Alcohol is absorbed in the stomach and if there is food there already, it will take alcohol longer to get through.
- Get help if you think that your drinking is slipping out of control — don't be afraid to ask your doctor.



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.



To work out the number of units of alcohol in a can or bottle when this is not given on the label use the following steps.

Multiply the % alcohol content by the volume of liquid.

Divide the answer by: 100 (if volume is stated in centilitres (cls) or by: 1000 if the volume is in millilitres (mls).

The answer is the number of units of alcohol in the can or bottle.

For example:

a 75cl bottle of wine with an alcohol content of 12%
 12 multiplied by 75 and divided by $100=9$ units

a 70cl bottle of vodka at 37.5%
 37.5 multiplied by 70 divided by $100=26.25$ units

a 440cl can of lager with an alcohol content of 5.2%
 5.2 multiplied by 440 divided by $1000=2.28$ units



Woodburn House, Canaan Lane, Edinburgh, EH10 4SG
www.healthscotland.com

