

Chest  
Heart &  
Stroke  
Scotland



# ALCOHOL



ESSENTIAL GUIDE

# This Essential Guide is about alcohol.

## It explains:

- The long-term risks of drinking alcohol.
- The recommended weekly limit.
- The link between alcohol, your weight and your mood.
- Signs you may be drinking too much and tips on how to cut down.

# Alcohol and your health

Drinking too much alcohol increases your risk of developing serious health conditions. This includes heart disease, stroke, diabetes, chest conditions, cancer, and liver disease.

Alcohol also affects your mood, behaviour, and reflexes. This can damage your health and increase the risk of injury.

It is therefore good for your health to limit how much alcohol you drink.

Regularly drinking more than the recommended limit of **14 units** of alcohol a week puts you at **three times higher risk of having a stroke.**

# How alcohol affects your body

- When you drink alcohol, your **heart rate and blood pressure** go up.
- Alcohol affects your **arteries**, making it harder for your heart to pump blood around your body.
- Too much alcohol can make your **heart beat** in an irregular way. This can increase your chances of developing long-term health problems.
- Alcohol can **reduce blood flow** to some parts of the body, causing physical damage.
- Alcohol is a **depressant**, which makes your brain work more slowly. This can cause **bad moods, depression, and slow reflexes**.

- Alcohol **affects your liver** and too much of it can lead to problems with **blood clotting**. This can increase your risk of stroke.
- Alcohol can increase your **cholesterol** level and affect your **weight**. These, in turn, increase your risk of heart disease and stroke.
- Alcohol can weaken your immune system. This means that you are at higher risk of developing **chest infections**.
- Excessive alcohol consumption over a lengthy time period **can lead to brain damage**. It may also **increase your risk of developing dementia**.

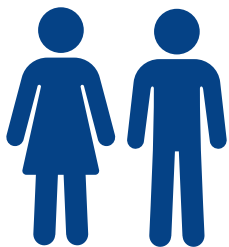


# How much alcohol is safe to drink?

There is no safe amount of alcohol to drink. Drinking any alcohol carries some level of risk. However, you can lower your risk by staying **within the recommended limit**.

The recommended limit is 14 units of alcohol per week. This is the same for both men and women.

If you do drink as much as 14 units a week, spread them out over 3 or more days.



It is safest not to drink more than **14 units a week**.

If you are worried that you may be drinking too much, it may help to ask yourself the following questions:

- **Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?**
- **Have people annoyed you by criticizing your drinking?**
- **Have you ever felt bad or guilty about your drinking?**
- **Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or get rid of a hangover (eye-opener)?**

If you answered "yes" to two or more of these questions, it may be a sign that you are drinking too much.



# What is a unit?

A unit of alcohol is the amount of alcohol an average body can process in 1 hour.

The number of units in a drink depends on its size and strength. Some alcoholic drinks will include the units of alcohol per serving on their label.

The label on a bottle or can of alcohol will tell you the “alcohol by volume” or “%ABV”.

This value tells you how many units of alcohol are in 1 litre (1000ml) of the drink. For example, 3.8% ABV = 3.8 units of alcohol per litre.

To calculate how many units are in a drink, you can use the free online tool at:  
[alcoholchange.org.uk/alcohol-facts/  
interactive-tools/unit-calculator](https://alcoholchange.org.uk/alcohol-facts/interactive-tools/unit-calculator)

## One unit is the same as:



**218ml of a standard  
4.5% ABV cider**

2½ units in a pint



**76ml of a standard  
13% ABV wine**

2¼ units in a standard glass



**25ml of a standard  
40% ABV whisky**

1 unit in a single



**250ml of a standard  
4% ABV beer**

2¼ units in a pint



**250ml of a standard  
4% alcopop**

1¼ units in a bottle

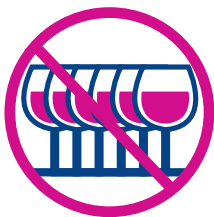
# What is binge drinking?

Drinking a lot of alcohol on a single occasion is called binge drinking.

Binge drinking for **men** is drinking **more than 8 units on a single occasion**.

Binge drinking for **women** is drinking **more than 6 units on a single occasion**.

Binge drinking puts extra pressure on your liver and kidneys. This makes the impact of drinking much more destructive.



Binge drinking increases your blood pressure, and your risk of having a heart attack, or developing heart disease.

# Alcohol and weight

Cutting back on alcohol can help you lose weight. This is because:

- Alcohol is high in 'empty calories'. These are calories that provide your body with energy but none of the vitamins, minerals or nutrients it needs.
- Alcoholic drinks can also have added calories from mixers, sugar, syrup, cream and fruit juice.
- Alcohol increases your appetite. This can lead to snacking and eating more than you should.

## Did you know...?



=



calories

1 pint  
of beer

1 large slice  
of pizza



=



calories

1 large glass  
of wine

1 ice-cream

# Alcohol and your mood

Some people use alcohol to help them relax or improve their mood. However, in the long term, alcohol has the opposite effect.

Alcohol is a “depressant” - a chemical which reduces your brain activity. It can increase your risk of anxiety, anger, depression, or sadness. It is also addictive. As time goes on, it can become harder and harder to get the short-term stress relief that many people are seeking.

There are lots of things you can do instead of drinking alcohol to help you deal with stress and low mood. Try talking to a friend or family member about how you feel. Exercise can also help. Keeping a diary or blog may also help you.



# Signs you may be drinking too much

You drink alcohol as a first response when stressed or upset.

You have trouble sleeping.

You feel low a lot of the time.

You have to drink more to get the same effect.

You often suffer from black-outs or memory loss while drinking.

You often change or cancel plans because you are drinking or feel hungover.

You are always thinking about when you can have your next drink.

Friends or family have expressed concerns about your drinking.

Your memory is not as good as it was.

# The benefits of cutting down

Drinking less can have a positive effect on your overall health and wellbeing. Some of the benefits of cutting down include:



Losing weight



Sleeping better



Reducing stress



Avoiding hangovers



Improving concentration



Saving money



Feeling better about yourself



Reducing health risks

# Tips for cutting down

Choose drinks containing a lower level of alcohol (a low %ABV or vol).

Drink water at the same time as your alcoholic drink.

Have a non-alcoholic drink in between alcoholic drinks.

Do not use alcohol to quench your thirst or drink alcohol while thirsty. If you are thirsty, drink a non-alcoholic drink.

Sip your drinks slowly rather than gulping or drinking quickly.

Try to meet friends in places like cafés or restaurants, rather than pubs or bars.

When drinking at home it is common to pour larger measures. Use appropriate tools, such as a single shot measurer to stop this.



# Help if you need it

If you think you may be drinking too much and need support or advice to cut down or stop, there is help available.

Speak to your doctor, get information online at **[www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk)**, or call Drinkline Scotland on **0800 7314 314** for free, confidential advice. You can do this if you are worried about your drinking or someone else's.

It can also help to speak openly and honestly with your friends and family if you are concerned about your drinking, or about theirs.

People in your life may be able to help by rearranging social events to be alcohol-free. You could also ask friends and family to tell you if they notice changes in your behaviour around alcohol, or to help you to stop drinking sooner.

You can contact Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland's Advice Line for more information and personalised advice from our trained health practitioners:

**Tel:** 0808 801 0899


**Email:** [advice@chss.org.uk](mailto:advice@chss.org.uk)


**Text:** ADVICE to 66777




# Myths and facts


 **MYTH:** Alcohol abuse is always obvious in someone's behaviour.


 **FACT:** Alcohol abuse can often be subtle and go unnoticed for a long time. Not everyone behaves the same when drunk, and many people hide their drinking.


 **MYTH:** You can "sober up" with strong coffee or a cold shower.


 **FACT:** The only thing that will get rid of alcohol in your system is time. It takes about an hour to process 1 unit of alcohol.


 **MYTH:** Drinking alcohol is only damaging if you do it frequently.


 **FACT:** Even if you do not drink often, drinking a lot of alcohol at once can still damage your liver and other organs.


 **MYTH:** If you develop a tolerance for alcohol and can “handle your drink”, you can drink more without bad effects.

 **FACT:** Tolerance is a warning sign that you are drinking too much. Drinking too much continues to do damage to your body.

 **MYTH:** Drinking can help with symptoms like chronic pain.

 **FACT:** Evidence suggests that, in most cases, drinking alcohol actually makes chronic pain and other neurological symptoms worse.

 **MYTH:** Alcohol problems are a sign of poor willpower.

 **FACT:** Anyone can experience problems with alcohol. It is a medical condition, and having problems with alcohol does not reflect on a person’s personality.

Our publications are free to everyone in Scotland, in PDF and in print. See them all at [www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub](http://www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub)

For free, confidential advice and support from our Advice Line Team, contact:

**0808 801 0899 (Mon-Fri 9am-4pm)**

**text ADVICE to 66777**

**[advice@chss.org.uk](mailto:advice@chss.org.uk)**

One in five people in Scotland are affected by chest, heart and stroke conditions or Long Covid. Go to [www.chss.org.uk/supportus](http://www.chss.org.uk/supportus) to find out how you can help us support more people in Scotland.

To give feedback or request alternative formats, email: [health.information@chss.org.uk](mailto:health.information@chss.org.uk)

**Chest  
Heart &  
Stroke  
Scotland**



**Scan here to see  
all our resources!**

Updated: March 2026  
Next review: March 2029  
E7-v3.1-March2026

Scottish Charity (no SC018761)