

# alcohol

Alcohol is a drug and comes in many forms, including beer, cider, wine, 'alcopops,' and spirits such as whisky, gin and vodka.

Alcohol is legally available in the UK from licensed outlets to people aged over 18 years and is enjoyed and used safely by many people. However, alcohol is a major cause of health and social problems, and, after tobacco, causes more deaths in the UK than any other drug.

## Short-term effects of alcohol

Alcohol relaxes the brain and body, and is normally drunk for its pleasant effects. Because of its power to alter mood and make physical changes, it can also lead to physical, psychological and social problems. Many people find that moderate drinking (a unit or two of alcohol a day) helps relieve stress, encourages relaxation and acts as an appetite stimulant. A unit of alcohol is equal to a half-pint of normal strength beer or lager, a pub measure of spirits, a glass of wine, or a small glass of sherry or port.

Health Agencies recommend that men should not drink more than 3 to 4 units of alcohol per day. For women, the daily limit is 2 to 3 units. This advice applies regardless of whether you drink daily, weekly or somewhere in between. Drinking all your weekly limit in one session (often called binge drinking) can lead to poor coordination, vomiting, exaggerated emotional reactions (including sadness, tearfulness, anger and aggression) and can lead to unconsciousness. Women who are pregnant or planning to become so, are advised to drink no more than 1 to 2 units per week.

A hangover the next day – headache, dry mouth, feeling sick and tired – is a very common consequence of heavy drinking the night before. These effects are caused by dehydration and toxicities, so if you drink alcohol, you should drink plenty of water as well.

As even small amounts of alcohol can have an effect on your coordination, reactions and judgments, you should never drink even small amounts of alcohol and drive, or operate machinery.

Extremely heavy drinking can lead to coma and even death.

## Longer-term effects of alcohol

Long-term heavy alcohol consumption (ten or more units a day in a man or six or more in a woman) can cause ill health, affecting the liver, heart and brain. Drinking every day can also lead to physical and psychological dependence on alcohol.

In addition, people who drink heavily often don't eat well and this can cause further health problems. Alcohol is a depressive drug and

cause or make worse mental, psychological or emotional problems. Used in conjunction with other drugs, such as over the counter pain-killers like paracetamol, alcohol can have more serious effects.

## Alcohol and HIV

There is no evidence that moderate drinking (a unit or two of alcohol a day) does any harm to people with HIV. However, if you have hepatitis or high levels of blood fats, then you may have to stop drinking alcohol altogether or cut down alcohol consumption.

Heavy drinking can affect your immune system and may slow down recovery from infections.

Heavy alcohol use can have potentially serious consequences for people taking anti-HIV drugs. Alcohol is processed by the liver and a healthy liver is important for the body to process medicines effectively. The blood fat increases caused by some anti-HIV drugs can be made worse by heavy drinking.

People who have hepatitis as well as HIV are advised not to drink alcohol at all, or to keep alcohol consumption to an absolute minimum.

People whose liver has been damaged by drinking too much alcohol (especially if they have hepatitis) are more likely to experience side-effects from anti-HIV drugs, particularly protease inhibitors.

Alcohol can react badly with certain medicines (e.g. rifampicin, rifabutin, metronidazole) so it is good advice to check with your pharmacist if it is safe to drink alcohol with any new medicines you may be prescribed. However, there is no significant interaction between any of the currently available anti-HIV drugs and alcohol.

Alcohol can cause vomiting. If you vomit within an hour of taking a dose of your anti-HIV drugs, or any other medicine you have been told to take, then you should retake the dose.

## Help with alcohol problems

If you are concerned about your drinking speak to a member of your health care team, who will be able to direct you to somebody who can help. Alcohol Concern, one of the UK's largest alcohol charities, can be contacted via <http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk>, or phone Drinkline on 0800 917 8282. More information on Scottish support services is online at <http://www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk>, or phone 0141 576 6700.

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