

Alcohol Use

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Introduction, social pressures and norms

It is not unusual for people to have an alcoholic drink at the end of a stressful day "to help unwind". The initial effects of alcohol are to depress the nervous system and to damp down or depress difficult feelings.

For this reason, many of us like to have a drink to ease the anxiety in social situations. This is fairly strong in our culture. We may also have developed an appreciation of the taste of certain drinks and enjoy being a connoisseur of good beer or fine wine etc.

Among student groups there has always been a culture of heavy drinking - this goes back to complaints in medieval times about students getting drunk and disrupting townsfolk. Today it can still feel as if it's expected in some groups to get 'bladdered' and to brag about consumption. There may be expectations of heavy binge drinking - sometimes to the point of unconsciousness. Advertisers further exploit this by promoting alcohol as a lifestyle choice and associating it with excitement and fun.

There can be pressure from others to join in drinking games and prolonged drinking bouts: friends may tease you if you don't keep up with rounds or match their consumption. It also gets harder to say no as you drink more.

People also sometimes drink to excess, to blot out depressed feeling. They then end up feeling even worse, as alcohol is a depressant itself. This can lead to a dangerous downward spiral. In all these instances, the drinking of alcohol will be meeting a wide range of needs and expectations for the individual.

In the following section, we give information about the effects of alcohol on our bodies and on our minds, ways in which you can calculate your own health risk and ways to help you if you want or need to change your drink pattern.

Safe drinking levels

As an introduction it is worth looking at the Governments recommended safe levels to drink. The recommended amount for adults is:

- Men and Women: 1-2 units a day (14 units a week) or less, these are best spread out over 3-4 days and not consumed in one go!

These limits are for adults, which is people whose bodies are fully developed, there are no safe limits for young people. To find out how to calculate your units go to www.drinkaware.co.uk.

If you want to cut down how much you're drinking, a good way to help achieve this is to have several drink-free days each week.

Drinking above these limits starts to increase the risk of damage to health. Examples of alcohol abuse illnesses are, depression (alcohol is actually a depressive drug), liver damage, pancreatitis, degeneration of the cerebellum, etc. There is a dangerous risk of alcohol poisoning after heavy binge drinking. Always seek medical help for anyone who has passed out from drinking.

For pregnant women the research varies. Some studies show that drinking 1 or 2 units once a week does no harm, other studies show that even this amount may increase the risk of miscarriage. Drinking large amounts of alcohol during pregnancy can lead to birth defects in the unborn child, which are referred to as Foetal Alcohol Syndrome.

Apart from physical damage, alcohol is also a contributing factor in over 60% of fatal car accidents, and other fatalities such as drowning, fire death, freezing, and accidental asphyxiations. It is also a factor in over 60% of all suicide attempts, and a major factor in cases of violence. Add to that the increased risk of accidents, and such things as unprotected sex and risk taking whilst under the influence of alcohol and you can get some idea of the widespread of issues that alcohol plays a part in.

Drinking at high levels can, and does, lead to physical dependency. This is roughly seen at 100+ units per week in a man and 70+ units per week for a woman, though it can be less if the liver is already damaged. If you are drinking at these levels it is advisable to see your GP as soon as possible.

How can I tell how many units are in a drink?

A UK unit of alcohol is equal to approximately 8 grams or 10 millilitres of pure alcohol. This means that if you have a litre bottle of cider at 7.5% alcohol by Volume (ABV), that bottle will contain 7.5 units.

A rough pub guide is that one unit is equivalent to half a pint of ordinary strength (3.5% ABV) beer, one glass of wine (125ml) or one single (25ml) measure of spirits. What needs to be taken into account though is that in today's current alcohol market not that many beers are 3.5% ABV, most beers these days are stronger. For example, Budweiser in a can or bottle is 5% ABV, Carling Black Label in a can is 4.1% ABV, Hooch in a bottle is 5% ABV.

Here is a table to help you work out how many units are in a pint, bottle, can or glass of different strength drinks by using the tables below. Check the label or can for the strength of a drink (% alcohol by volume or % ABV) and the volume of the container and use this information to find the number of units in the relevant table.

Beer, Lager and Cider

%ABV	1%	2%	3.50%	4.50%	5.50%	6%	7%	8%	9%	9.50%
Pint (568 ml)	0.6	1.1	2	2.6	3.1	3.4	4	4.5	5.1	5.4
Small bottle (275 ml)	0.3	0.6	1	1.2	1.5	1.7	1.9	2.2	2.5	2.6
Bottle (330 ml)	0.3	0.7	1.2	1.5	1.8	2	2.3	2.6	3	3.1
Can (440 ml)	0.4	0.9	1.5	2	2.4	2.6	3.1	3.5	4	4.2

Alco-pop

% ABV	4%	4.50%	5%	5.50%	6%
Bottle (275 ml)	1.1	1.2	1.4	1.5	1.7
Can or large bottle (330 ml)	1.3	1.5	1.7	1.8	2

Wine

%ABV	8%	9%	10%	11%	12%	13%	14%
Bottle (750 ml)	6	6.8	7.5	8.3	9	9.8	10.5
Glass (125 ml)	1	1.1	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.8
Large glass (175 ml)	1.4	1.6	1.8	1.9	2.1	2.3	2.5

Spirits

%ABV	37.5%	40%	50%
Bottle (700 ml)	26.3	28	35
Large single* (35 ml)	1.3	1.4	1.8
Single* (25 ml)	0.9	1	1.3

*Licensed premises may choose whether to serve spirits in either 25ml or 35ml measures and multiples of these

Fortified Wines & Aperitifs (eg. Sherry, Martini)

% ABV	15%	16%	17%	18%	20%	24%
Bottle (750ml)	11.3	12	12.8	13.5	15	18
Glass (50ml)	0.8	0.8	0.9	0.9	1	1.2

If you have worked out how much you are drinking in a week by units - why not work out how much money you have spent on alcohol as well - it might just surprise you how much you did spend!

What if I feel I am drinking too much?

It is worth knowing that different people have different drinking patterns. Some people binge drink e.g. - heavy drinking sessions across the weekend. Some people drink every evening, some people will drink throughout the day. The main thing to remember is that if you are drinking more than the recommended amount of units per day, you increase the risk to your health. Binge drinking is dangerous.

If you are worried about the level of your drinking, it may be that you need to think about why you are drinking so much.

People drink for all sorts of reasons, from enjoyment and to help them socialise, through helping them keep calm, to forget things, to deal with anxiety etc.

What are the gains from your drinking? That is, what are the good things that you think you are getting from it?

Start to think about the negatives your alcohol use is causing, remember that if you start to reduce or stop altogether. You will start to reduce these negatives.

Can you start to cut down or stop your drinking? It is not advisable for anyone drinking at levels such as 100+ units per week for a man, or 70+ units per week for a woman to suddenly stop drinking as there is a risk of suffering severe withdrawal symptoms and fitting. In such cases medical advice should be sought from a medical professional.

Ideas to help you cut down or stop drinking

- Explore what needs drink is meeting for you. Are there other ways you can meet the needs?
- If you feel you are drinking to cope with anxieties and worry, what other more positive ways could you use to cope? How about exercise or taking a long relaxing bath, read a book, watch a film, go bowling, join a club at the Student Union.
- If you feel you can start to reduce your drinking then it is worth thinking about how you can achieve that. Some ideas are:
 - Drink at the pace of the slowest drinker in your group
 - Avoid getting into rounds and feeling you have to keep up
 - Give yourself drink-free days so your body can recover

- Switch to non-alcoholic drinks. Explore these and enjoy finding some you really like. Now that everyone is aware of the effects of dehydration on brain cells, thinking and mood, bottled water is cool too.
- Alternate with non-alcoholic drinks.
- Avoid spirits and choose drinks with greater volume so that they last longer, e.g. add soda water to wine to make a spritzer or drink beer instead of shots.
- Tell people who pressure you to drink alcohol that:
 - "Thanks for your concern but I'm happy"
 - "I don't feel like drinking tonight"
 - "I'm in training"
 - "I'm calorie counting"
 - "I'm on antibiotics"
 - "Doctor's orders"
 - "I'm saving for a car/laptop/phone"
 - "I'm driving"
- Try talking to a few friends when they are sober, to get them to support you if you plan to cut it out/reduce your drinking.
- If someone tells you they want to do this, support them. It's part of 'Looking out for your mate'.
- It is important to remember when looking for alternatives to using alcohol that it should be something that you enjoy, is safe, and can be accessed or done easily, the same things are not going to suit everybody, so think about what your needs are.

Concerned about someone else's drinking?

It can be very difficult to help someone who you feel is drinking too much; especially if they are not in a place where they accept that they have a problem. It can be useful to try and find a time when the other person is sober, and you are both reasonably calm. Tell them about the problems their drinking is causing and how it makes you feel. Try to find out how they feel about their drinking and what they get from it. Discuss with other family members or friends what you are trying to do as this way everyone can take a similar approach and present a more united support, which the drinker will find less confusing.

Let the drinker know what you find acceptable and not acceptable and set your boundaries. Do not make empty threats if a person crosses the boundaries that you have set, they need to be aware that there will be consequences and that you stick to this.

Do not encourage them to drink or give them money so that they can buy drink etc.

You may also find it helpful to talk about how you feel with a member of the counselling service. Having any sort of relationship with someone who is abusing alcohol can be very stressful and you need to look after your own needs as well.

What sort of help is available?

If you feel you need further help with your drinking there are various organisations and professionals that can help.

There are two general models of working with people with alcohol problems, these are:

The Functional Model

This argues that a person, with help, can work out all the functions of their drinking and generate alternative ways of coping. Some people may choose to control their drinking (this is not the same as social drinking, it is very much a planned style of drinking) others may choose to be abstinent. Some after a period of abstinence may return to drinking in a problem-free way. The emphasis is on people being self-responsible and working on ways that an individual can help themselves.

The Disease Model

This argues that the drinker must admit to being an alcoholic, with the goal of lifelong abstinence. This is because it is believed the alcoholic has an incurable disease.

This approach is characterised by AA and is often known as a medical model.

Useful contacts

If you are a student and drinking is affecting your ability to do your academic work, you may wish to talk to your personal tutor - as well as seeking professional help from one of the services listed below.

If you are a member of staff, you may wish to talk to your line manager or personnel adviser or union representative - as well as seeking professional help from one of the services listed below:

[Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity team](#): 01509 228338

studentwellbeing@lboro.ac.uk

To book an appointment with any of our services within Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity (including the Counselling Team, Mental Health Support Team and the Wellbeing Advisers), please complete [the referral form](#).

Loughborough services:

- Your GP
- **[Turning Point](#)**
55-56 Woodgate, Loughborough, LE11 2TG
Tel 0330 303 6000
- **APAS (Alcohol Problems Advisory Service) Helpline**
Mon to Fri 9-7 Tel: 0115 8240 550
- **[Alcoholics Anonymous](#)** helpline Tel. 0800 9177 650
Loughborough/Leicester AA: c/o John Storer House, Loughborough, meetings Wednesday 8pm

UK wide services:

Drinkchat

A free online service for anyone who is looking for information or advice about their own, or someone else's, alcohol use.

Drinkline: 0300 123 1110 (weekdays 9am to 8pm, weekends 11am to 4pm).

Free helpline in complete confidence.

Alcohol Change

Information about alcohol, and how to get in touch with your nearest alcohol advice centre

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

Free self-help group.

Al-Anon Family Groups

Offers support and understanding to the families and friends of problem drinkers, whether they're still drinking or not.

Addaction

A UK-wide treatment agency that helps individuals, families and communities manage the effects of drug and alcohol misuse.

Adfam

Working with families affected by drugs and alcohol. Adfam operates an online message board and a database of local support groups.

The **National Association for Children of Alcoholics (Nacoa)**: 0800 358 3456

Free, confidential telephone and email helpline for children of alcohol-dependent parents and others concerned about their welfare.

FRANK 0300 123 6600 7

National Drugs Helpline

Samaritans: (UK) 08457 909090

SMART Recovery

Group support with tools and techniques to support recovery.

Further Useful Websites

www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

www.thesite.org

www.drugscope.org.uk

www.drinkaware.co.uk