

Recommended Safe Limits of Alcohol

See your doctor or practice nurse if you are drinking above the recommended limits of alcohol and are finding it difficult to cut down.

What are the recommended limits of alcohol drinking?

- **Men** should drink no more than 21 units of alcohol per week (and no more than four units in any one day).
- **Women** should drink no more than 14 units of alcohol per week (and no more than three units in any one day).
- **Pregnant women.** It is known that a lot of alcohol can damage a developing baby. A small amount probably does no harm. However, the exact amount that is safe is not known. Therefore, to play safe, advice from the Department of Health is that pregnant women and women trying to become pregnant should not drink at all. If you do choose to drink when you are pregnant then limit it to one or two units, once or twice a week. And never get drunk.

The more you drink above these limits, the greater the risk of developing serious problems such as: liver disease (cirrhosis or hepatitis); stomach and pancreas disorders; depression; anxiety; sexual difficulties; muscle and heart muscle disease; high blood pressure; damage to nervous tissue; serious accidents; some cancers; obesity (alcohol has many calories). See separate leaflet called '*Alcohol and Sensible Drinking*' for more details.

What is a unit of alcohol?

One unit of alcohol is 10 ml (1 cl) by volume, or 8 g by weight, of pure alcohol. For example:

- One unit of alcohol is about equal to:
 - half a pint of ordinary strength beer, lager or cider (3-4% alcohol by volume), or
 - a small pub measure (25 ml) of spirits (40% alcohol by volume), or
 - a standard pub measure (50 ml) of fortified wine such as sherry or port (20% alcohol by volume)
- There are one and a half units of alcohol in:
 - a small glass (125 ml) of ordinary strength wine (12% alcohol by volume), or
 - a standard pub measure (35 ml) of spirits (40% alcohol by volume)

But remember, many wines and beers are stronger than the more traditional ordinary strengths. A more accurate way of calculating units is as follows: the percentage alcohol by volume (% abv) of a drink equals the number of units in one litre of that drink. For example:

- Strong beer at 6% abv has six units in one litre. If you drink half a litre (500 ml) - just under a pint - then you have had three units.
- Wine at 14% abv has 14 units in one litre. If you drink a quarter of a litre (250 ml) - two small glasses - then you have had three and a half units.

Some other examples

Three pints of beer, three times per week, is *at least* 18-20 units per week. That is nearly the upper weekly safe limit for a man. However, each drinking session of three pints is *at least* six units, which is more than the safe limit advised for any one day. Another example: a 750 ml bottle of 12% wine contains nine units. If you drink two bottles of 12% wine over a week, that is 18 units. This is above the upper safe limit for a woman.

Isn't alcohol good for you?

For men aged over 40 and for women past the menopause, it is thought that drinking a small amount of alcohol (1-2 units per day) helps to protect against heart disease and stroke.

References

- [Alcohol - problem drinking](#), Clinical Knowledge Summaries (September 2010)
- [No authors listed](#); Getting tight on units of alcohol. *Drug Ther Bull.* 2001 Dec;39(12):95.
- [The Pregnancy Book 2009](#), Dept of Health
- [Alcohol consumption and the outcomes of pregnancy](#), Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (2006)
- [Alcohol-use disorders - preventing harmful drinking](#), NICE Public Health Guidance (June 2010); *Alcohol-use disorders - preventing the development of hazardous and harmful drinking*
- [Alcohol-use disorders: physical complications](#), NICE Clinical Guideline (June 2010)

Comprehensive patient resources are available at www.patient.co.uk

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