




Making a change

Helping you make positive choices
about the amount you drink

This resource may also be made available on request in the following formats:



 **0131 314 5300**

 **nhs.healthscotland-alternativeformats@nhs.net**

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1 South Gyle Crescent
Edinburgh EH12 9EB

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NHS Health Scotland is a WHO Collaborating Centre for Health Promotion and Public Health Development.

This booklet offers practical advice to help you consider your drinking habits

Alcohol misuse is a major public health issue in Scotland. It causes high levels of harm to individuals, their families and relationships, as well as the wider society and economy. The past 50 years have seen a big increase in the amount of alcohol we are drinking. As a result, there have been more cases of accidents, injuries and health problems caused by alcohol.

If you drink more than the weekly drinking guidelines (see page 2) it can affect your health and make you more likely to be involved in an accident or to be a victim of crime.

GPs, A&E departments and other healthcare services, along with local authorities, education, criminal justice, charities, communities, and other organisations are working with the public to increase awareness of alcohol-related problems, and to encourage everyone to enjoy the benefits of drinking less.

Choosing change

Making small changes to your drinking can make a difference to your health in the long term.

It is important that you take responsibility for changing the amount and way you drink. You are more likely to change your drinking habits if it is important to you, not just because someone else has told you to change.



Some alcohol-related facts:

Alcohol is a leading cause of death in people aged under 75 years in Scotland. This includes deaths from cancer, liver disease, stroke and accidents.

In the majority of violent crimes committed in Scotland, the victim said the offender was under the influence of alcohol.

Alcohol is associated with a range of physical and mental health problems, as well as being a factor in a variety of social issues; for example, drink-driving, community problems, fatal fires, violence and crimes.

Tolerance to alcohol does not protect you from harm.

Alcohol harm costs Scotland billions of pounds a year in health, social care, crime, productive capacity and wider costs.

Weekly drinking guidelines

For **both men and women**, the **UK Chief Medical Officers** advise:

- To keep health risks from alcohol to a low level it is safest not to drink more than **14 units a week** on a regular basis.
- If you regularly drink as much as 14 units per week, it is best to spread this evenly over **three days or more**. If you have one or two heavy drinking episodes a week, you increase your risks of death from long-term illnesses and from accidents and injuries.
- The risk of developing a range of health problems (including cancers of the mouth, throat, bowel and breast) increases the more you drink on a regular basis.
- If you wish to cut down the amount you're drinking, a good way to help achieve this is to have **several drink-free days per week**.

How much is too much?

14 units is the equivalent of:

- six pints of 4% beer or
- six 175 ml glasses of 13% wine or
- fourteen 25 ml measures of 40% spirits.

You can work out how many units are in any drink. Simply multiply the volume (in ml) by the % ABV (strength) then divide by 1,000. For example, a 750 ml bottle of wine which is 13% ABV would be: $750 \times 13 = 9,750/1,000 = 9.75$ units.

Why cut down?

Drinking too much alcohol can have a harmful effect on areas of your life that you may not be aware of including your physical and mental health, your family and relationships, your job, and your community. For example, alcohol is associated with higher levels of:

Job

- absenteeism
- loss of earnings
- poor performance

Family and relationships

- family breakdown
- strained relationships
- unprotected sex
- domestic abuse
- child abuse and neglect
- financial problems

Community

- accidents, falls and injury
- anti-social behaviour
- crime and violence
- road traffic accidents

Health

- heart disease
- cancer
- stroke
- high blood pressure
- liver damage
- infertility
- pancreatitis, gastritis, indigestion
- depression
- dementia
- anxiety, stress and panic disorders
- amnesia/memory loss
- suicide.

Units and strength explained

1 unit = 10 ml of pure alcohol. The number of units you are drinking will depend on the size and strength of your drink.

Strength = alcohol by volume (ABV)



One pint of beer/
lager/cider
(4% ABV) =

2.2 units



330 ml bottle of
beer/lager/cider
(5% ABV) =

1.7 units



175 ml glass
of wine
(12.5% ABV) =

2.2 units



250 ml glass
of wine
(12.5% ABV) =

3.1 units



One 25 ml
measure of spirit
(vodka/gin/rum)
(37.5% ABV) =

0.9 units



750 ml bottle
of wine
(12.5% ABV) =

9.4 units



One 25 ml measure
of spirit (whisky/
brandy/dark rum)
(40% ABV) =

1 unit



One 35 ml measure
of spirit (whisky/
brandy/dark rum)
(40% ABV) =

1.4 units

A pint of beer or glass of wine can have the same calories as a packet of crisps, an ice cream or a sugar doughnut.

It takes approximately an hour for your body to break down one unit of alcohol.

Pregnancy and breastfeeding

Pregnancy

If you are pregnant or think you could become pregnant, the safest approach is not to drink alcohol at all, to keep risks to your baby to a minimum.

Drinking in pregnancy can lead to long-term harm to the baby – the more you drink the greater the risk. If you have been drinking during pregnancy, speak honestly with your midwife for support during and after pregnancy.

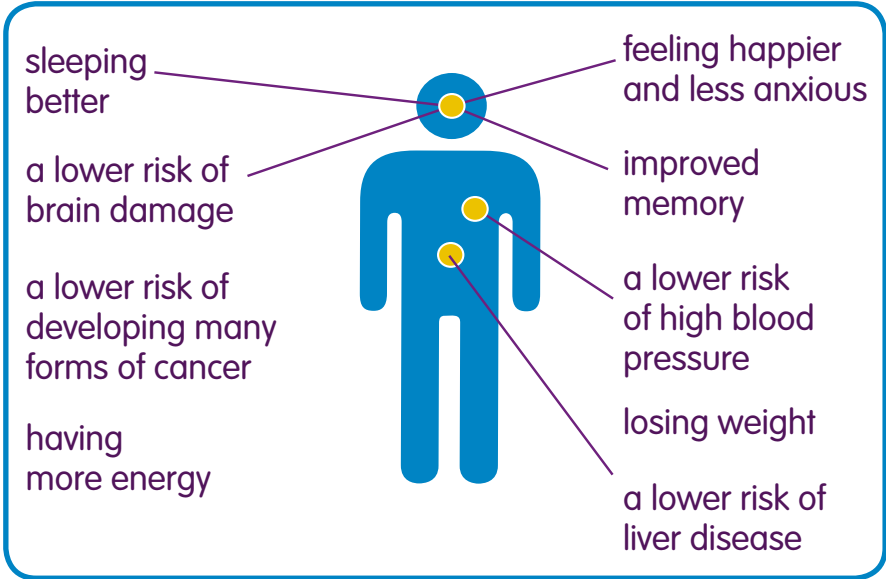
Breastfeeding

- For women who are breastfeeding, not drinking alcohol is the safest option for your baby's development. Alcohol passes from your bloodstream into your breast milk and this can affect your baby's sleeping patterns. We also know that alcohol can reduce your supply of breast milk and it is particularly important in the first few weeks to be able to fully establish your supply of milk. If you do drink, avoid drinking just before breastfeeding or express milk beforehand to give to your baby later.

For more information on alcohol in pregnancy and breastfeeding, visit www.nhsinform.scot/alcohol-in-pregnancy

What are the benefits of change?

Cutting down the amount of alcohol you drink is good for your body and can make a difference to the way you feel. Some of the benefits people find when they drink less may include:



Cutting down may have other benefits too, some of which could include:

- a lower risk of accident or injury
- less chance of getting involved in fights
- developing better relationships
- feeling more positive about yourself
- having more time for other interests
- improving employment opportunities
- saving money, either through purchasing less alcohol or potential for increased earnings.

Thinking about change

Change is not always easy. It can be difficult to cut down the amount you drink when people around you aren't changing their drinking habits. When you first cut down the amount you drink, you may feel it's best to avoid certain situations where alcohol will be involved. However, there are also advantages that you may not even have thought of, such as having more energy and time for activities (see 'What are the benefits of change?', left).

Using a 'pros and cons' list is a good way to help you decide if you want to reduce the amount you drink. Page 8 contains a pros and cons grid that you can complete to help you think about your drinking. The list should contain things that matter to you. Looking at the benefits listed, which of these matter to you? What about the risks of drinking? If any of these worry you, include them in the grid too. Use the questions to help you fill in the grid.

When you have completed the grid, think about where that leaves you. If you feel you might consider changing your drinking habits, have a look at the 'Small steps' section (page 10) and see what might work for you. You may decide after listing the pros and cons that you are not ready to change your drinking habits. You will know best if and when you are ready to make a change.

If you want more information, or would like support to cut down the amount you drink, remember you can talk to a health professional such as a GP or nurse, who can give you advice and help to cut down. There are also other sources of help and information listed at the end of this booklet.

Pros and cons of cutting down your drinking

Advantages of current drinking

- What do you enjoy about your drinking right now?
- How do you feel about this?

Disadvantages of current drinking

- Is there anything that is not so good about your drinking at the moment?
- What impact does this have?

Disadvantages of change

- What would be the worst thing about changing what/how you drink?
- What effect would this have?
- What other negative aspects would there be?

Benefits of change

- What would be the benefits of changing your drinking habits?
- What difference would this make to you?
- What other advantages might there be?

Building confidence and making a change

If you have decided you want to change the amount you drink, this is a positive step forward.

Try to think about a time in the past when you have successfully made changes in your life (for example, giving up smoking or losing weight). Are there any techniques that worked for you that you could use now?



Think about the positive steps you have already taken. Make a note of them here. Remember, recognising that you are ready for change and taking the first step can be the hardest part.



It is useful to have someone you feel can give you support when making a lifestyle change. Is there anyone you know in a similar situation who has been successful? Who can offer you support? Again, make a note here of what you can do to get the support you need.



Small steps

Making small changes to the amount you drink, what you drink and when you drink can help you reduce the amount of alcohol you consume overall. Consider the simple changes below that could make a difference to your drinking levels. Tick those that you feel would work for you:

Drink on fewer occasions

- Plan to do something else instead.
- Plan ahead each week which days you will avoid alcohol – it is best to spread your drinking over three or more days.
- Save the money that you would have spent on alcohol and treat yourself.
- Get involved in social activities that don't revolve around alcohol.

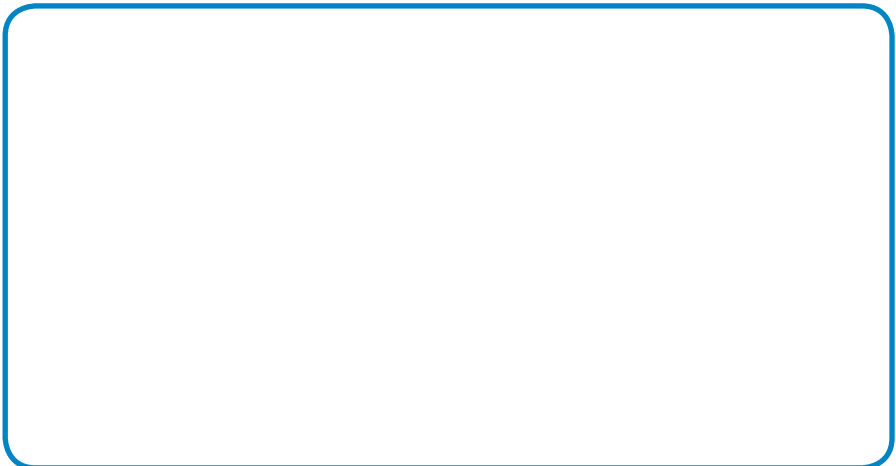
Reduce the amount of alcohol in each drink

- Switch from a higher alcohol content to a lower strength drink; for example, from a beer, lager or cider at 5% to one at 4%.
- Introduce some drinking 'rules'; for example, don't drink before 8 pm.
- Take your car to social events and don't drink at all.
- Switch to smaller measures:
 - from a 250 ml glass of wine to a 175 ml glass
 - from pints to bottles
 - use a smaller glass at home
 - use a unit measure at home.

Drink fewer alcoholic drinks

- Pace yourself – plan how long you will be out and how many drinks you will have, and stick to your plan.
- Occupy yourself – don't just drink but participate in other activities; for example, darts, bowling, reading, talking or eating.
- Switch between alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks or, if you are drinking in a round, try to avoid having an alcoholic drink every round.
- Try to drink at the same pace as a slower-drinking friend or buddy up and help each other to cut down.
- Only buy alcohol when you plan to drink it, and avoid keeping bottles and cans in the house.
- At home, don't finish the bottle – keep some for another day.
- Not everyone drinks alcohol – it's OK to say no.
- Try to start drinking at a later time than you usually would.

Make a note of other techniques that may work for you

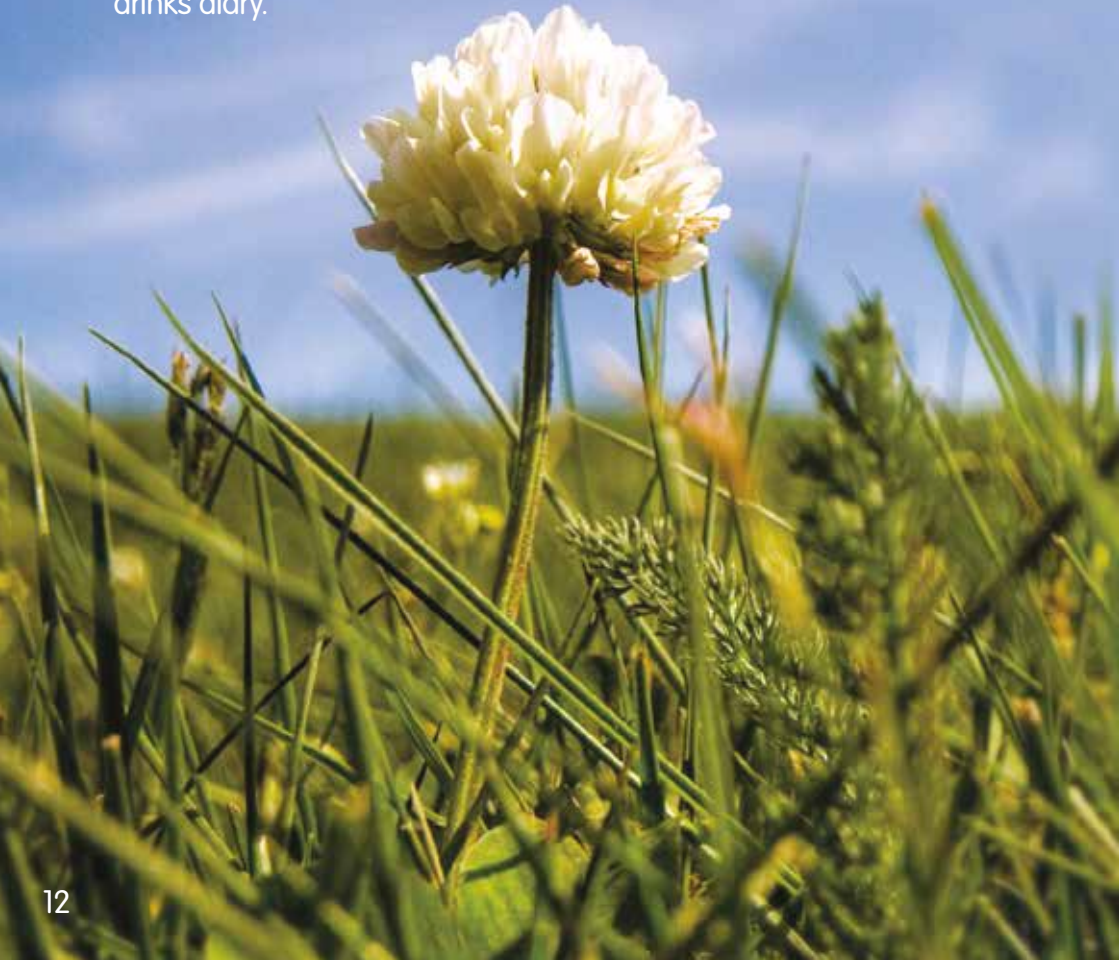


Keeping track of change

Changing habits can be a slow process. Setting yourself short-term goals which are easier to achieve will keep you motivated.

Try keeping track of your progress, possibly using a drinks diary. A drinks diary can be used to record what you are drinking and why you are drinking. It is a good way to keep track of the amount of alcohol you drink over a week and to identify the times you are most likely to drink.

You can use the drinks calculator (on page 4) to work out how many units you are drinking and record them in your drinks diary.



Drinks diary

Day	Where	What	Unit	Total
Total for the week				

Drinks diary

Day	Where	What	Unit	Total
Total for the week				

A close-up photograph of a man and a young girl. The man, on the left, is wearing a grey knit beanie and a blue and white patterned sweater. He is looking down with a focused expression. The girl, on the right, is wearing a brown knit beanie and a purple sweater. She has long blonde hair and is smiling broadly, looking down at the same point as the man. They appear to be outdoors, possibly near a body of water or a stream, with green foliage in the background.

Staying motivated

There will be times when you find it difficult to stick to your plans and cut down the amount you drink. It might help to identify these situations in advance so you can come up with ways to cope with them.

Don't worry if your attempts to change don't work the first time. Going back to old drinking habits can be triggered by stressful events or circumstances. Try not to feel guilty or lose confidence; see this as part of the process of change and learn from it. If you can, work out why it happened. If it was an event or particular situation, is it possible to avoid this in future?

Coping with difficult situations: planning ahead

Look ahead to the next few weeks and list all the social situations or events where you would usually drink. Think of all the people, places or situations where that urge to drink is likely to be the strongest. Think about ways you can avoid feeling excess pressure to drink.

Try to think of situations when your mood might influence how much you drink and think of ways to cope; for example, listening to particular music or making a phone call. If possible, try to prevent the situation happening.

Realise that slip-ups are common and that one slip doesn't mean failure. It is important to get back on track as soon as possible. You may be disappointed or frustrated, but focus on building your confidence and your determination.

You can use this space to make a note of things to help you plan for difficult situations:

Further information/support

If you are concerned about your own drinking, or that of a family member, you can seek advice from your GP or other health professional or from the following services:

Alcohol Focus Scotland

www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk

Find alcohol services across Scotland, alcohol news, publications, campaigns, and training information.

Samaritans

www.samaritans.org

Telephone: 116 123 (free)

'If there's something troubling you, then get in touch. We're here 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.'

Breathing Space

<https://breathingspace.scot/>

Telephone: 0800 83 85 87 (free)

'...Don't let problems get out of hand; phone Breathing Space where experienced advisors will listen and provide information and advice.'

Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol & Drugs

www.sfad.org.uk

Telephone: 08080 10 10 11 (free) Mon–Fri, 9 am–11 pm;
Sat–Sun, callback service.

Supports families across Scotland who are affected by alcohol or drugs misuse and raises awareness of the issues affecting them.



www.healthscotland.scot