



# Alcohol and You

Facts about alcohol,  
staying safe and  
what to do if things go wrong

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**You may feel it's unfair that your age group is always in the press for 'bingeing' and getting drunk. This isn't true – as over 70% of British 16–24 year olds go out to socialise and have a good time without getting drunk.**

**But the truth is you're more likely to go home with a stranger, embarrass yourself and your mates, be robbed or be attacked if you get drunk or lose control.**

**This guide gives you tips on how to stay safe and drink sensibly, if you choose to drink, plus what to do if things go wrong.**

### Did you know?

- Only 13% of 11–15 year olds drink weekly
- 55% of 11–15 year olds have chosen not to try alcohol at all
- Just 1% of 11 year olds drink weekly

This guide is written and produced by The Alcohol Education Trust, [www.alcholeducationtrust.org](http://www.alcholeducationtrust.org). If you require further information please email: [jane.hutchings@aim-digest.com](mailto:jane.hutchings@aim-digest.com) or visit [www.talkaboutalcohol.com](http://www.talkaboutalcohol.com). Information within this guide is based on Government and the UK Chief Medical Officers' guidelines and was current when going to press Autumn 2011.

Statistics are drawn from: The Drug Use, Smoking and Drinking among young people in England 2010 report, The Chief Medical Officer's Guidance for parents on underage drinking 2009 and NHS, Statistics on Alcohol: England 2010.

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## Top Tips

Enjoying a drink forms an important part of many young adults' social lives. We've put together some tips to help you stay in control and have a good time.

### Units and mixing

The amount of alcohol in drinks varies a lot, so check the label to find the alcohol content of your drink. Many drinks now carry unit icons on the packaging or back labels.

For example, a small glass (175ml) of wine at 12% alcohol will contain 2 units, the same as a double vodka or whisky, or a pint of traditional beer at 3.5%. However, many premium beers will be 4.5% or above, increasing your intake by a unit per pint, and a large glass of wine at 14% will be nearly 4 units.

Home pours of drinks are usually much bigger than pub measures, so with spirits have a long mixer and plenty of ice. Also watch out for 'top ups' – you can kid yourself that you're still on the same drink – finish your glass first before having another drink, so you can keep more of a tally on your intake.

### Pace yourself

If you are going to be drinking over several hours – either out on the town or at friends', you could drink much more than you realise. A great way to stay on top is to alternate soft drinks or water with each alcoholic drink. Alcohol is dehydrating, so water or long refreshing pacers make a big difference - especially if you're dancing and using energy!

### A quick bite

It's very tempting, especially if you're going out straight from college or work, not to eat. Having a quick sandwich or bowl of cereal before you go out will line your stomach and alcohol will not be absorbed so quickly into the blood stream.

### Look out for each other

Recent polls show that over 30% of us have taken risks or have got into an uncomfortable situation by either going home after a night out on our own or with a stranger. Don't risk it!

Also, never leave your drink unattended in bars and clubs or accept drinks from complete strangers. Look out for your mates and make sure they look out for you.



## Getting home safely

If you're going out as a group and taking a car, then decide beforehand who's going to be the designated driver. You could all buy non-alcoholic drinks for them and pay for the petrol too.

If you aren't taking a car, make sure you know how you're getting home. Have phone numbers for reliable taxi firms to hand, or find out about public transport and put aside some cash so you don't spend it.

If you have to walk home, don't walk through unlit or unsafe areas and avoid walking on your own. Don't let your friends wander off by themselves either, especially if they've been drinking.

## Peer pressure – go on have another one

It's sometimes very hard to resist your mates' encouragement to have another drink, or not to feel a party pooper if you say no or move to drinking soft drinks. You may also think you want your money's worth if you've bought a big round of drinks early in the evening and it's your friend's turn to buy the drinks.

### Tips

- Try to avoid big rounds of drinks. You'll be out of pocket and it could encourage you to drink too much.
- Choose drinks that are lower in alcohol like a spritzer, a single spirit with a long mixer, or a low or alcohol free beer – who can tell the difference?
- Offer to be the designated driver for the evening – it'll save you all money and you'll be very popular with your friends if you get them home safely.



# How much is too much?

## Units and daily guidelines

UK daily guidelines for sensible levels of drinking for adults define a 'unit' or 'drink' as 8g (1cl of pure alcohol) and recommend that men should not exceed 3-4 units a day and women 2-3 units a day. Guidelines vary for men and women as women are generally smaller than men and have less body water; also they have less of the enzyme which breaks down alcohol. How alcohol affects you will depend on your age, size, sex and health. How quickly you drink and whether you're eating also affects how alcohol is absorbed by the body.

Guidelines are daily rather than weekly, as you should not 'save up' units and drink heavily at the weekends. Binge drinking over one or two nights a week can lead to health problems and anti-social behaviour. If you exceed the guidelines, it is recommended that you have 48 hours without alcohol to give your liver a chance to recover. There is no safe level of drinking if you are under 18 as your brain and liver aren't fully developed and the toxins from the breakdown of alcohol have a much greater effect.

Labels on bottles of alcoholic beverages usually contain information to help you.

Icons on the label give the total number of units contained in a bottle or the number of units in a specific standard measure as well as alcoholic strength.

How many units in a drink?				<b>CHECK THE LABEL</b> Most drinks tell you how many units are in them	
1 =				<b>Know your limits</b> Units of alcohol per 125ml glass 	
	A small bottle (275ml) of lower strength (14%) alcopop	A half pint of lower strength (4%) lager, beer or cider	A single measure of spirit (40%)		
2 =				<b>The UK Chief Medical Officers recommend that adults do not regularly exceed:</b>  2-3 units a day for women  3-4 units a day for men	
	A standard glass (175ml) of lower strength (12%) wine or champagne	A pint of lower strength (4%) lager, beer or cider	A 440ml can of medium strength (4.5%) lager, beer or cider		A double measure of spirit (40%)
3 =					
	A pint of medium strength (5%) lager, beer or cider	A large glass (250ml) of low strength (12%) wine	A large bottle (750ml) of lower strength (4%) alcopop		
4 =					
	A large bottle (750ml) of higher strength (5.5%) alcopop	A 500ml can of high strength (7.5%) lager, beer or cider			

## When not to drink

### DON'T

- Drink and drive
- Operate machinery, use electrical equipment or work at heights after drinking
- Drink heavily before playing sport
- Drink while on certain medications - ask your doctor if you are unsure
- Binge drink - it can lead to health and other problems
- Drink when you are pregnant.

For more information visit:  
[www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk) or  
[www.drinkingandyou.com](http://www.drinkingandyou.com)

# How too much alcohol affects the body

## Brain

Too much alcohol acts a depressant on the brain, the control centre of the body. It can make the drinker feel happy for a little while, but that's followed by a depressing low. Long-term drinking can kill off brain cells and lead to memory loss and mental problems.

## Head

After a few drinks, it can be easy for someone to lose their head. They may feel more relaxed, emotional and uninhibited, but they also lose control. Their judgement is affected too. They might make a fool of themselves, get into trouble, cause an accident or do something they regret later. Every year, 18-22% of accidental deaths are alcohol related. Alcohol draws water out of the brain. So, as the body starts to break down alcohol, the drinker may feel dizzy and be in for a throbbing headache if they drink too much.

## Heart

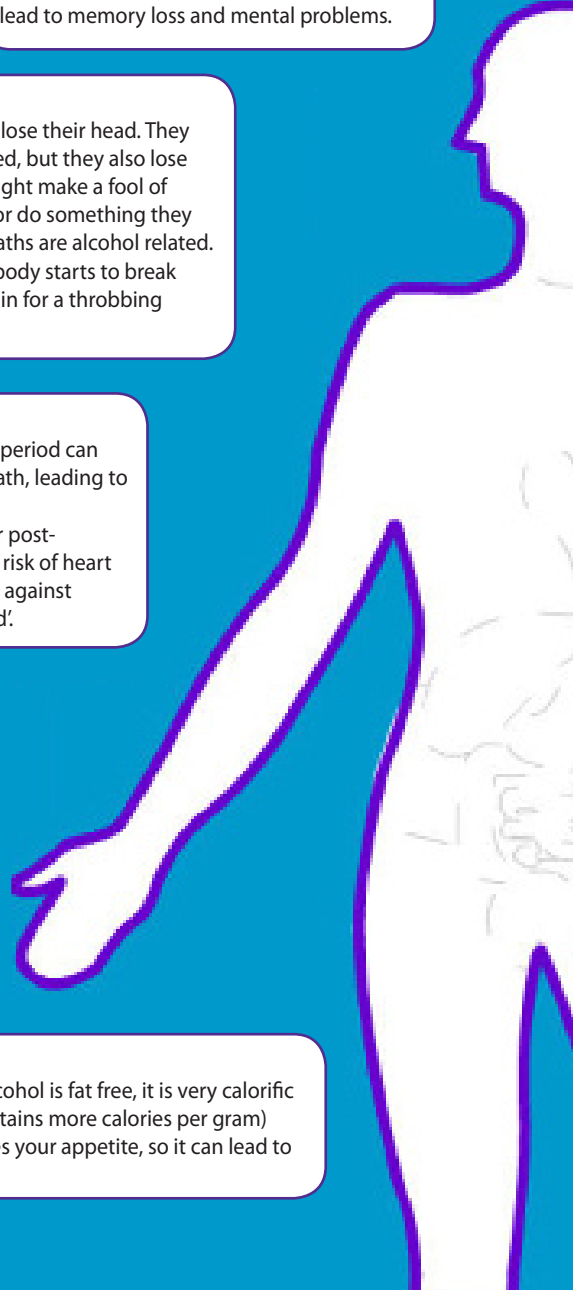
Drinking large quantities of alcohol over a short period can cause irregular heart beats and shortness of breath, leading to panic attacks and illness. The government guidelines also suggest that for post-menopausal women and men over 40 when the risk of heart disease is highest, a daily drink can help protect against cardiovascular disease as alcohol 'thins the blood'.

## Reproductive organs

Drinking alcohol can affect performance in the bedroom because the drinker's not fully in control of their body. Alcohol affects judgement too, so people may have unsafe sex or sex they later regret. In women, excessive drinking may delay menstruation and affect fertility. As alcohol crosses the placenta to the baby, you should not drink if you are pregnant.

## Waist

Although alcohol is fat free, it is very calorific (only fat contains more calories per gram) and increases your appetite, so it can lead to weight gain.





### **Skin**

Too much alcohol dehydrates the body, which is bad news for the skin and complexion. It also dilates the blood vessels under the surface of the skin, leading to ugly veins on the nose and cheeks.

### **Eyes**

Alcohol dilates blood vessels in the eyes, so they can look red and 'bloodshot'. It also affects the signals sent from the eyes to the brain - vision becomes blurred, and distances and speeds get harder to judge. Many road accidents involve drivers or pedestrians who have alcohol in their blood.

Too much alcohol also suppresses REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep. It's the most important phase of sleep so drinking can ruin the chance of a good night's rest.

### **Gut**

Alcohol is absorbed from the stomach into the bloodstream. Your body's ability to process alcohol depends on various things, like your age, weight and sex. Your body breaks down alcohol at a rate of roughly one standard drink per hour. Because it takes time for your body to break down alcohol, drinking more than one unit of alcohol an hour will build up your blood alcohol concentration (BAC) and it may be many hours before you are safe to drive. After a night of heavy drinking you risk being over the drink drive limit the next morning.

### **Liver**

The liver breaks down most of the alcohol a person drinks. (The rest leaves the body in breath, urine and sweat.) But it can only break down about 1 unit (8g) of alcohol an hour in an average adult. More than that, and it stops working properly. If the body can't cope with all the alcohol in its system, the person falls into an alcoholic coma (which can be fatal).

Long-term heavy drinking kills off liver cells, leading to a disease called 'cirrhosis'. It's a 'silent' disease - symptoms may not be noticeable until the disease is advanced. Long-term excessive drinking can also lead to liver cancer.

### **Armpits**

Alcohol is also excreted as smelly body odour and bad breath - not great for attracting the opposite sex.

For more information, please visit

<http://talkaboutalcohol.com/YoungPeople/FactZone/FactZoneFlash30.aspx>

# The law and underage drinking

It is important to be aware of guidelines, facts and the law about alcohol in the UK.

**Under 5?** It is illegal to give alcohol to under 5s.

**Under 16?** With the new licensing law, it is now at the landlord's discretion whether children are allowed anywhere in a pub. They cannot of course, buy or drink alcohol on the premises.

**Under 18?** If you are under 18, it is illegal to buy alcohol (this includes in any shop or supermarket, off licenses, bars, clubs or restaurants and buying on line). It is illegal to buy alcohol for someone under 18 in a licensed premises, the only exception is for 16 or 17 year olds who are allowed to drink beer, wine or cider with food if with an adult (but they may not buy the alcohol themselves, except in Scotland).

It is legal for anyone over 5 to drink alcohol. The restrictions apply to purchasing (under 18) and location - in licensed premises or in alcohol exclusion zones.

Police have powers to confiscate alcohol from under 18s drinking in public spaces (e.g. in the street or in parks).

## Buying alcohol for those under 18

Police have the power to charge those over 18 who knowingly buy alcohol for anyone under the legal drinking age (buying by proxy). It is important that older friends and family know that they could be charged for supplying alcohol irresponsibly.

## Drinking and driving

It's against the law to drive with more than 80mg (milligrams) alcohol per 100ml (millilitres) of blood. If you break the law, you face a fine of up to £5000, six months in prison and having your licence taken away for at least a year. Causing death through drink-driving can result in a maximum prison sentence of 14 years and a two-year driving ban.

For more information, visit [www.drinkingandyou.com](http://www.drinkingandyou.com)

## Chief Medical Officers' Guidance

The UK Chief Medical Officers recommend that:

- An alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option. However, if children drink alcohol, it should not be until at least the age of 15 years.
- If young people aged 15 to 17 years consume alcohol it should always be with the guidance of a parent or carer or in a supervised environment.
- Young people should be aware that drinking, even at age 15 or older, can be hazardous to health and that not drinking is the healthiest option for those under 18.
- If 15 to 17 year olds do consume alcohol they should do so infrequently and certainly on no more than one day a week.
- Young people aged 15 to 17 years should never exceed recommended Government guidelines of 2-3 units for women and 3-4 units for men.



## Party survival guide

### A night out

- Plan how you're going to get home before you leave. Make sure you've got numbers for taxis and keep aside enough money to get home safely.
- Eat before you go out, or during the evening.
- Ideally avoid getting involved in a round. Alternatively, limit rounds to 2 or 3 friends. If you find yourself in a round but feel that others are drinking faster than you – or over recommended limits - it's OK to skip a drink. Also feel free to remove yourself from the round altogether.
- Drink water regularly to stay refreshed and hydrated
- Use soft drink beverages to pace yourself.
- Don't accept drinks from strangers and never leave your drink unattended - it's all too easy for someone to spike your drink... with more alcohol, for example.
- Look out for your friends and make sure they look out for you.

### Is it worth it?

You're far more likely to be involved in an accident, violence or to get in trouble with the police if you drink to excess. If you end up with a criminal record, it affects your chances of a good career and did you know that you can't go to the US if you have a criminal record?

Even drinking to get drunk occasionally can have serious consequences. It affects your judgement and can increase risky behaviour, which could result in:

- Injuries and accidents
- Unsafe sex, which could result in sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies
- You being robbed or going home with a stranger
- Fights, arguments and relationship problems
- Getting into trouble with the police and getting a criminal record.



## Having friends round?

When you have friends over:

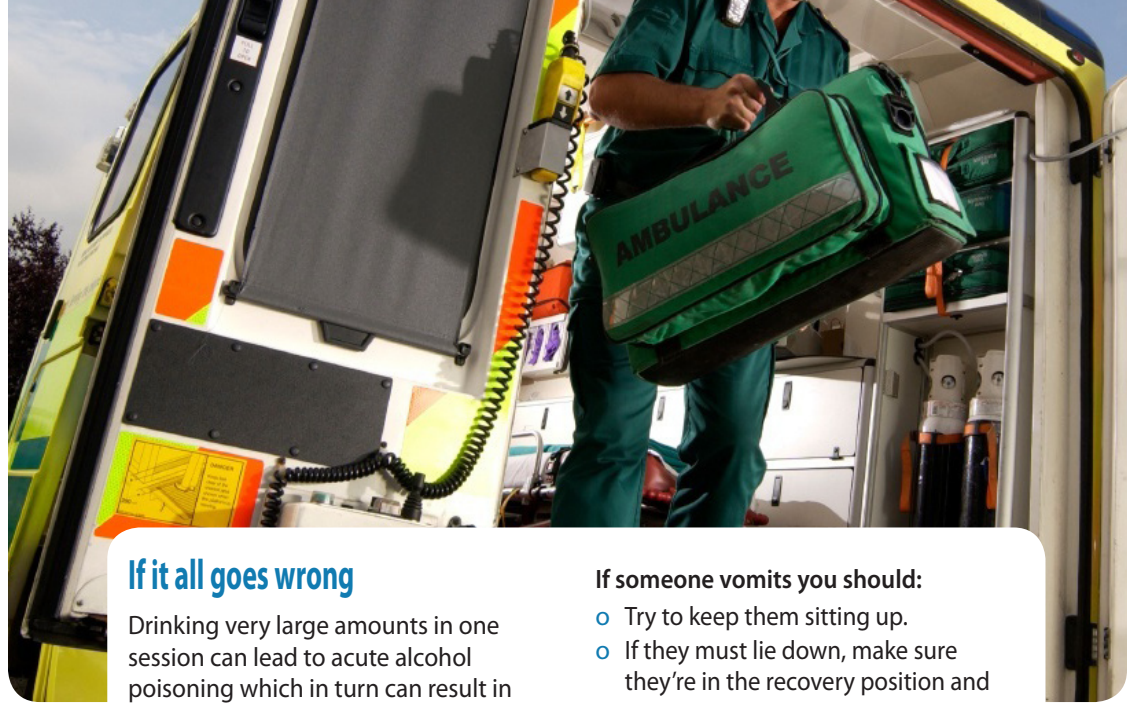
- Serve food - preferably not salty snacks that make you drink more!
- If you're serving home made cocktails, don't make them too strong - and have shot measures if guests are mixing their own.
- If a few guests are getting worse for wear, encourage them to have a soft drink or to sit down and eat something.
- Keep a special eye out for younger people and make sure they're OK.
- Make sure everyone can get home safely, with a sober driver, reliable public transport, or a licensed cab, Alternatively offer them a bed for the night.
- Last but not least - don't drink too much yourself!

## Top tips for the morning after

If in spite of your best intentions you end up drinking more than you should, there are a few things you can do to ease the morning after.

- Drink as much water as you can before going to sleep, and put some beside the bed too.
- Take an antacid to settle your stomach.
- Alcohol is a depressant, so tea or coffee can perk you up (but they can also dehydrate you, so keep up the water as well). Drinking lowers your blood sugar level, so eat as soon as you can. Bananas, cereal, or egg on toast are all good morning-after snacks.
- Never ever do 'hair of the dog' - you'll just prolong the agony.
- Have 48 hours without alcohol if it was a heavy session.
- And next time, follow our top tips for a great night out and you won't suffer again.





## If it all goes wrong

Drinking very large amounts in one session can lead to acute alcohol poisoning which in turn can result in unconsciousness, a coma, or even death.

If it all goes wrong, it's essential to get emergency help...

### If someone loses consciousness after drinking too much, here's what to do:

- Keep them on their side with their head turned to the side (the recovery position).
- Make sure they're breathing and their mouth and airways are clear.
- If they stop breathing, start mouth to mouth resuscitation.
- Loosen any tight clothing that might restrict their breathing.
- Keep them warm (but not too hot) - with blankets or a coat.
- Call an ambulance but don't leave them... ask someone reliable to call the ambulance.

### If someone vomits you should:

- Try to keep them sitting up.
- If they must lie down, make sure they're in the recovery position and that their mouth and airway are clear.
- If they begin to choke, get help immediately.
- Don't leave them even if you can't bear the sight or smell of someone vomiting. Alcohol poisoning is extremely dangerous. It can lead to a coma and in extreme cases, death. The amount of alcohol it takes to cause alcohol poisoning depends on many factors, including size, weight, age and so on. Teenagers and inexperienced drinkers are particularly vulnerable.

### Someone may have alcohol poisoning if:

- They are breathing less than twelve times a minute or stop breathing for periods of ten seconds or more.
- They're asleep and you can't wake them up.
- Their skin is cold, clammy, pale and bluish in colour.

**If you suspect someone has alcohol poisoning, treat it as a medical emergency - call an ambulance and stay with the person until help arrives.**

## Further sources of information

Here are some good youth-friendly websites offering advice on alcohol:

**Talk About Alcohol** – [www.talkaboutalcohol.com](http://www.talkaboutalcohol.com)

Here you'll find quizzes, interactive games and facts about alcohol.

**Drinking and You** – [www.drinkingandyou.com](http://www.drinkingandyou.com)

There is a section for under 18s that links you to resources on different sites.

**The Site** – [www.thesite.org](http://www.thesite.org)

**Talk to Frank** – [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)

**The Alcohol Education Trust** – [www.alcholeducationtrust.org](http://www.alcholeducationtrust.org)

If you're worried about your or someone else's drinking or if you're worried about dependency and alcohol problems, the following sites could help:

### **ADFAM**

Provides information and advice for families of alcohol and drug users. The website has a list of local family support services.

Tel: 0207 553 7640 [www.adfam.org.uk](http://www.adfam.org.uk)

### **Alateen**

Alateen is part of the Al-Anon fellowship and has been developed for young people, aged 12 to 20, who are affected by a problem drinker.

Tel: 0207 403 0888 [www.al-anonuk.org.uk/alateen](http://www.al-anonuk.org.uk/alateen)

### **Addaction**

Provides treatment, help and advice about alcohol and drugs for young people and adults. Manages more than 120 services in 80 locations in England and Scotland.

Tel: 0207 251 5860 [www.addaction.org.uk](http://www.addaction.org.uk) and [www.youngaddaction.org.uk](http://www.youngaddaction.org.uk)

### **Childline**

Provides confidential help and counselling for young people.

Tel: 0800 1111 (Freephone) [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

### **Drinkline**

If you're worried about your own or someone else's drinking, you can call this free helpline, in complete confidence. They can put you in touch with your local alcohol advice centre for help and advice.

Tel: 0800 917 8282 (24 hours a day helpline)

If you have any feedback or comments regarding this guide or the web materials on

[www.talkaboutalcohol.com](http://www.talkaboutalcohol.com) or [www.drinkingandyou.com](http://www.drinkingandyou.com),  
or if you would like to join the mailing list for updates and new resources,  
please email [jane.hutchings@aim-digest.com](mailto:jane.hutchings@aim-digest.com)

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