



# Alcohol and You

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



[talkaboutalcohol.com](http://talkaboutalcohol.com)



[alcoholeducationtrust.org](http://alcoholeducationtrust.org)



[drinkingandyou.com](http://drinkingandyou.com)



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 80% 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 8% of 11–15 year-olds drink weekly
- 62% 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, [alcoholeducationtrust.org](http://alcoholeducationtrust.org).

If you require further information please email: [info@alcoholeducationtrust.org](mailto:info@alcoholeducationtrust.org).

Information within this guide is based on Government and the UK Chief Medical Officers' guidelines and was current when going to press in June 2016. Statistics are drawn from: Smoking, Drinking And Drug Use Among Young People In England In 2014, The Chief Medical Officer for England's Guidance On The Consumption Of Alcohol By Children And Young People, 2009 and Statistics on Alcohol: England 2015.

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## Top Tips

We've put together some tips to help you stay in control and have a good time if you choose to drink.

### Units and mixing

The amount of alcohol in drinks varies a lot, so check the label to find the alcohol content of your drink. Most drinks now have unit information on the back label. For example, a standard glass (175ml) of wine at 12% alcohol contains 2 units, the same as a double vodka or whisky, or a pint of beer at 3.5%. However, many premium beers will be 4.5% or above, increasing your intake by a unit per pint. Home pours of drinks are usually much bigger than pub measures, so with spirits, use a measure, 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. Each shot is one unit, with about 30 shots in a 70cl bottle!

You can download an app that adds up your drinks and calories at [www.nhs.uk/change4life/Pages/drinks-tracker-mobile-app.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/change4life/Pages/drinks-tracker-mobile-app.aspx)

### 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! All bars and clubs have to offer free tap water, so don't be afraid to ask.

Find out more at [talkaboutalcohol.com](http://talkaboutalcohol.com)

### 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 by either going home after a night out on our own or with a stranger. Don't risk it, never go home on your own or with someone you don't know well.

Also, never leave your drink unattended in bars and clubs or accept drinks from 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. Arrange a lift in advance or 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 don't go home 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 loser 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. Try these tips:

- Avoid big rounds of drinks. You'll be out of pocket and it could encourage you to drink too much.
- Choose drinks that are alcohol free or lower in alcohol like a spritzer, a single spirit with a long mixer, a tonic or a low alcohol 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 low risk guidelines for sensible levels of drinking for adults define a 'unit' or 'drink' as 8g (1cl) of pure alcohol and recommend that men and women should not exceed 14 units a week.

How alcohol affects you will depend on your age, size, sex and health. Women are generally smaller than men and have less body water; also they have less of the enzyme which breaks down alcohol.

How quickly you drink and whether you are eating also affects how alcohol is absorbed by the body, but in general your liver can break down one unit an hour.

Try not to '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?				
1 =	 A small bottle (275ml) of lower strength (4%) alcopop	 A half pint of lower strength (4%) lager, beer or cider	 A single measure of spirit (40%)	<b>CHECK THE LABEL</b> Most drinks tell you how many units are in them  <b>Know your limits</b> This bottle contains 6 glasses Units of alcohol per 125ml glass and 75cl bottle: 1.6, 9.8
2 =	 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	<b>The UK Chief Medical Officers recommend that adults do not regularly exceed:</b>    <b>14 units a week, for both men and women</b>  
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:

[talkaboutalcohol.com](http://talkaboutalcohol.com)  
[drinkingandyou.com](http://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. Moderate drinking, that is 1 or 2 units a day, may offer some protection from heart disease in men over 40 and in post menopausal women, but it is not advised that an adult takes up drinking if they don't already. It is more important to be physically active, eat a healthy, balanced diet and to avoid smoking.

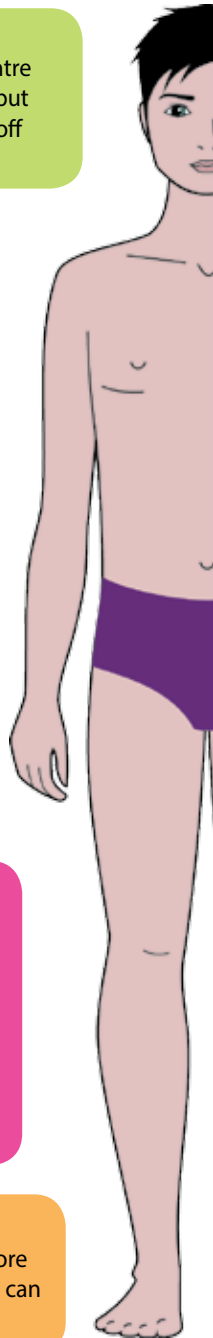
## Liver

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.

## Waist

Although alcohol is fat free, it is very calorific (only fat contains more calories per gram) and increases your appetite, so excess drinking 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**

Too much 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 heavily 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 unit 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. Learn more at [www.morning-after.org.uk](http://www.morning-after.org.uk)

### **Reproductive organs**

Drinking too much 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, heavy drinking may delay periods and affect fertility. As alcohol crosses the placenta to the baby, you should not drink if you are pregnant.

### **Armpits**

Excess alcohol is also excreted as smelly body odour and bad breath - not great for attracting potential partners.

For more information, please visit  
[www.talkaboutalcohol.com/interactive-body/](http://www.talkaboutalcohol.com/interactive-body/)



# 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?** It is at the landlord's discretion whether children are allowed anywhere in a pub. You 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 you may not buy the alcohol yourself).

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

Police have powers to confiscate alcohol from under 18s drinking in public spaces.

## Buying alcohol for those under 18

Police have the power to charge or fine 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 to minors.

## Drinking and driving

It's against the law to drive with more than 80mg (milligrams) alcohol per 100ml (millilitres) of blood or 50mg per 100ml in Scotland. If you break the law, you face a fine of up to £5,000, 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 [think.direct.gov.uk](http://think.direct.gov.uk)

## Chief Medical Officers' Guidance

The UK Chief Medical Officers recommend that:

- If young people 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.





## 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.
- If you're meeting at a mate's house before going out, watch how much you drink, especially if you're sharing a bottle. Each shot of spirit is a unit, a can of beer is 2 units on average and wine is 2 units or more a glass.
- 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.
- Never leave your drink unattended - it's all too easy for someone to spike your drink, with more alcohol, for example.

- Don't accept drinks from strangers.
- Look out for your friends and make sure they look out for you.

Find out more at [talkaboutalcohol.com](http://talkaboutalcohol.com)

### 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 get drunk. If you end up with a criminal record, it affects your chances of a good career, getting car insurance, 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.

## o Having friends round?

When you have friends over:

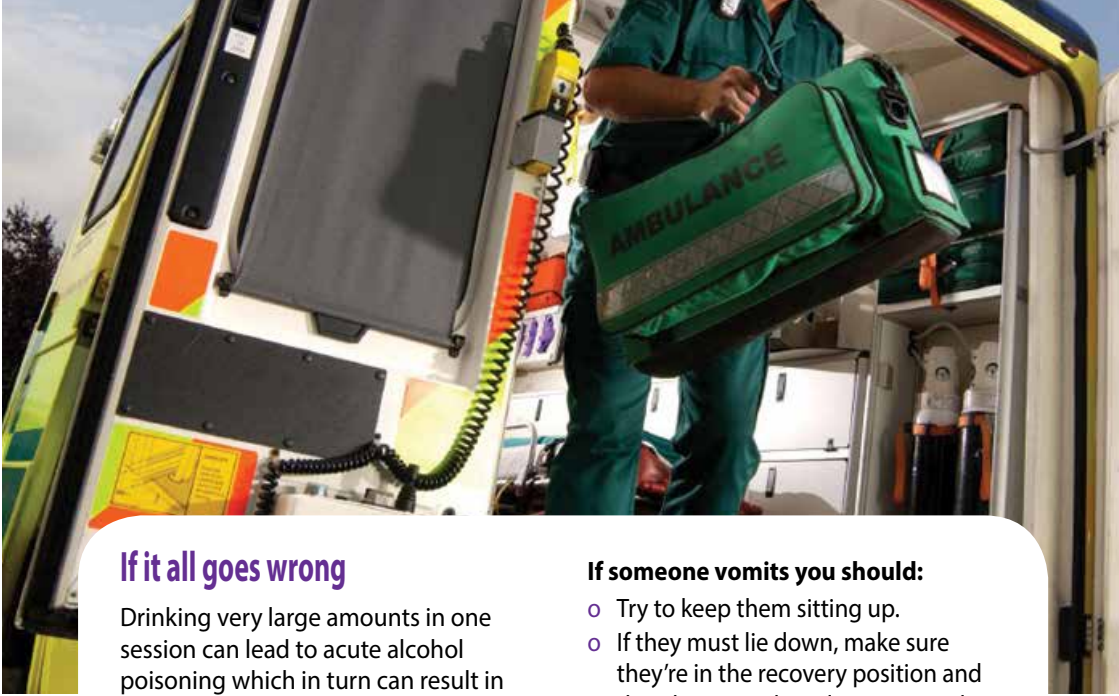
- o Serve food - preferably not salty snacks that make you drink more!
- o If you're serving home made cocktails, don't make them too strong - and have shot measures if guests are mixing their own.
- o If a few guests are getting worse for wear, encourage them to have a soft drink or to sit down and eat something.
- o Keep a special eye out for younger people and make sure they're OK.
- o 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.
- o Last but not least - don't drink too much yourself!



## Top tips for the morning after

If you end up drinking more than you should, there are a few things you can do to ease the morning after.

- o Drink as much water as you can before going to sleep, and put some beside the bed too.
- o Take an antacid to settle your stomach.
- o Alcohol is a depressant (slows down your reactions) so a coffee can perk you up (but can also dehydrate you, so keep up the water intake as well).
- o Drinking alcohol lowers your blood sugar level, so eat as soon as you can. Bananas, cereal, or egg on toast are all good morning-after snacks.
- o Never ever do 'hair of the dog' - you'll just prolong the agony.
- o Have 48 hours without alcohol if it was a heavy session.
- o 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 information and advice on alcohol:

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **The Alcohol Education Trust – [alcoholeducationtrust.org](http://alcoholeducationtrust.org)**

### **Young Minds – [youngminds.org.uk](http://youngminds.org.uk)**



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 **[adfam.org.uk](http://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

**[al-anon.alateen.org/for-alateen](http://al-anon.alateen.org/for-alateen)**

### **Childline**

Provides confidential help and counselling for young people.

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

### **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 **[addaction.org.uk](http://addaction.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: 0300 123 1110

If you have any feedback or comments regarding this guide or the web materials on **[talkaboutalcohol.com](http://talkaboutalcohol.com)** or **[drinkingandyou.com](http://drinkingandyou.com)**, please email **[info@alcoholeducationtrust.org](mailto:info@alcoholeducationtrust.org)**

If you would like to be involved, or make a donation to help support our important work, please log on to **[alcoholeducationtrust.org](http://alcoholeducationtrust.org)** and click on *Get involved*.



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