

# Focus on alcohol

A guide to drinking and health



**Health  
Promotion  
Agency**

# What's the situation in Northern Ireland?



A couple of drinks can make a party or celebration more enjoyable. It can even be good for us. But alcohol is a powerful drug and we need to be careful how we use it. Many of us in Northern Ireland do most of our drinking in a few sessions, often on a Friday or Saturday night. However, this pattern of drinking can put our health at risk.

## Long-term effects

Over a number of years, regular heavy drinking can:

- damage the liver, heart, brain and, especially with spirits, the stomach;
- cause some cancers, eg in the mouth, throat;
- increase the risk of some cancers, eg in the liver, stomach;
- lead to higher blood pressure;
- lower the libido (sex drive);
- make it harder for the body to fight off infections.

Regular, heavy drinking can also have social costs including:

- damaged relationships;
- family break-ups;
- money problems;
- difficulties at work; and
- trouble with the law.

## Short-term effects

Of course, most of us who drink aren't going to die from liver disease, or lose our job, home or family because of alcoholism. But drinking too much has some important short-term effects as well and these often have a much more immediate impact on our lives.

Getting drunk can lead to:

- vomiting;
- fights;
- accidents;
- hangovers.

Alcohol can also affect our judgement, leading us to do things we wouldn't otherwise do and that we might regret later. Too much alcohol in one go can even cause heart attacks or strokes.



In fact, alcohol has been estimated to be a factor in:

- 25% of road deaths;
- 30% of drownings;
- 30% of murders;
- 33% of accidents in the home;
- at least 39% of deaths in fires;
- 40% of incidents of domestic violence;
- 44% of theft charges;
- 45% of wounding and assaults;
- 88% of criminal damage arrests.

Drinking too much can be harmful, but there are also times when it's just not a good idea to drink at all, like:

- before driving or operating machinery;
- when working with electrical equipment or on ladders;
- when on medication;
- when looking after children;
- when taking part in potentially risky activities such as swimming and other active sports.



# How does alcohol affect us?



How we are affected by alcohol depends on lots of different factors including:

- age;
- weight;
- sex;
- how we feel before we start drinking;
- whether we've eaten recently.



Four people - a young person, an adult man, an adult woman, and an older person - who all drink half a pint of lager are likely to have four different levels of alcohol in their bloodstream, because:

- Young people tend to be smaller and weigh less than adults, so the alcohol affects them more.
- Women's bodies are made up of more fat and less water than men's. In men, between 55% and 65% of body weight is made up of water - in women it's only between 45% and 55%. This means that the alcohol is more concentrated in women's blood, so they will feel the effects of alcohol more quickly than men and for longer.
- Women also feel the effects of alcohol more quickly than normal just before a period, and during ovulation. This doesn't happen if a woman is taking the contraceptive pill, but the pill itself may make alcohol take longer to leave the body.
- Older people tend to have less body weight than younger adults, so the alcohol is more concentrated in their blood.



Women who drink heavily on a regular basis are more likely to damage their health than men. That's why the recommended lower risk limits for alcohol are different for men and women.

# What's in a drink?

Alcohol is usually measured in units. Many bottles of wine, beer and ready-mixed drinks have the units marked on the label. They will also have the percentage of alcohol in the drink marked on the label, eg **Alc. 4% vol** or just **4% vol**. The units given below for beer, lager or cider apply to ordinary strength drinks - about 4% vol. Extra strong varieties contain more alcohol - between 6% and 8% vol - and so could contain up to twice as many units. Ready-mixed drinks vary in strength and bottle size - check the label.



**pint of  
lager**

**2 units**



**half  
pint of  
lager**

**1 unit**



**half  
pint of  
cider**

**1 unit**



**Northern  
Ireland pub  
measure of  
spirits**

**1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> units**



**small  
glass of  
wine**

**1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> units**



**alcopop/  
ready-  
mixed drink**

**1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> units**

# How much is too much?

It's important not to drink too much in a single day.

- Men should not drink more than 4 units in any one day, and drinking 4 units or more a day every day increases the risk of harm;
- Women should not drink more than 3 units in a day, and drinking 3 units or more a day every day increases the risk of harm.



**bottle of  
lager**

**1½ units**



**pint of  
stout**

**2 units**



**can of  
extra  
strong  
lager**

**4½ units**



**small pub  
bottle of  
wine**

**2¼ units**



**bottle  
of wine**

**9 units**



**bottle with  
units marked  
on the label**

## Don't spoil a good night out!

The body can only deal with about 1 unit of alcohol every hour, so:

- space your drinks out and include non-alcoholic drinks;
- if you're drinking in rounds, don't feel you have to order an alcoholic drink every time;
- drinking water throughout the evening not only spaces out the alcohol intake, but it also helps prevent dehydration, one of the major hangover effects;
- if you're drinking at home, keep track of how many units you're drinking and use measures for spirits;
- if you do drink too much, have 1 or 2 alcohol-free days to allow your body to recover;
- it is better to slow down the rate at which alcohol enters your bloodstream, so avoid drinking on an empty stomach, and watch out for 'fizzy' alcoholic drinks or mixers, as the bubbles or gas speed up the passage of alcohol into your bloodstream.



## Drinking and driving

Although there is a legal limit for the amount of alcohol a person can have in their bloodstream and still drive, **there is no safe limit for drinking and driving.**



- Even one drink affects your judgement and reaction times.
- At the legal limit, your chances of having an accident are more than doubled.
- Someone who drinks a lot in the evening will still have alcohol in their bloodstream the next morning.

The only safe advice to follow is **NEVER drink and drive.**



## Alcohol and pregnancy

Alcohol can damage an unborn baby, so women who are pregnant should avoid alcohol, or at least cut down to a couple of drinks a week. Couples who are trying to get pregnant should also cut down, as alcohol can affect both the egg and the cells which produce sperm.

## Alcohol and weight

Alcohol has quite a high calorie content - weight for weight the alcohol in your drink contains almost as many calories as fat.

- A pint of average strength lager contains a total of 160 Calories, so drinking four pints in an evening adds up to 640 Calories.
- Three glasses of red wine adds up to nearly 300 Calories.
- In comparison, a 25g bag of crisps contains about 130 Calories.

Drink	Quantity	Calories
Stout	1 pint	210 Calories
Lager	1 pint	160 Calories
Cider	1 pint	200 Calories
Spirits	1 NI pub measure (35ml)	50 Calories
Wine	1 small glass (125ml)	80-100 Calories
Tonic (normal)	1 small bottle (150ml)	35 Calories
Pure orange	1 small bottle (150ml)	65 Calories
Coke (normal)	1 bottle (250ml)	100 Calories
Lemonade (normal)	1 bottle (250ml)	50 Calories

## Alcohol and the heart

Recently, research has been suggesting that alcohol can be good for us. In small amounts, alcohol can have health benefits for some people.

- For men aged over 40 or women who've been through the menopause, drinking 1 or 2 units of alcohol a day can reduce the risk of developing heart disease.
- There's no benefit to health in drinking more than 2 units a day.



## Useful contacts

If you are concerned about your own or someone else's drinking speak to your GP, who may refer you to a specialist agency.

There are also a number of voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland, which offer support and counselling. These include:

- Al Anon Tel: 028 9068 2368
- AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) Tel: 028 9043 4848
- Dunlewey Substance Advice Centre Tel: 028 9074 3999  
Tel: 028 9061 1162
- Northern Ireland Community Addiction Service (NICAS) Tel: 028 9066 4434
- Northlands Tel: 028 7131 3232

Further information about alcohol and its effects can be obtained from the health promotion resource service in your local Health and Social Services Board area.

- Eastern HSSB area Tel: 028 9032 1313
- Northern HSSB area Tel: 028 2563 5575
- Southern HSSB area Tel: 028 3752 0500
- Western HSSB area Tel: 028 7186 5221



**Health**  
Promotion  
Agency



**Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland**

18 Ormeau Avenue, Belfast BT2 8HS.

Tel: 028 9031 1611 (Voice/Minicom). Fax: 028 9031 1711.

[www.healthpromotionagency.org.uk](http://www.healthpromotionagency.org.uk)