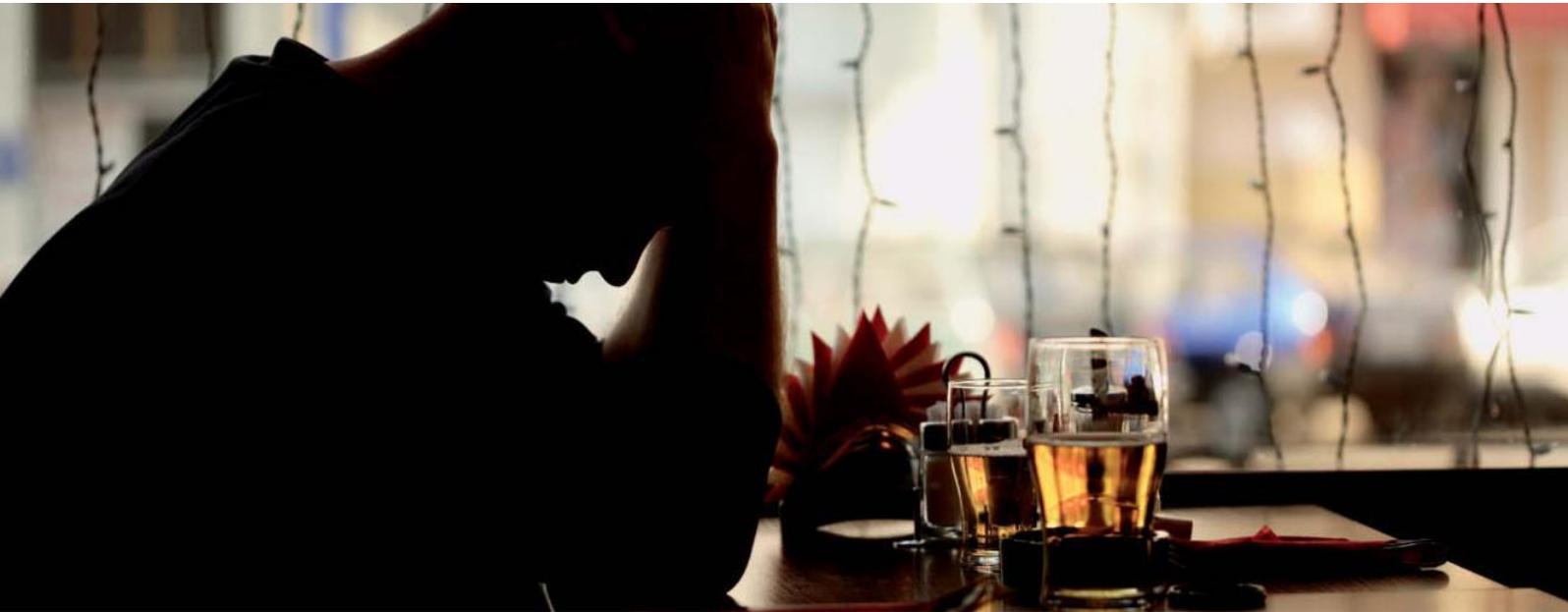


# Facing Up to Alcohol



**“ Always do sober what you said you’d do drunk. That will teach you to keep your mouth shut. “**

Ernest Hemingway, American writer and journalist (1899-1961)

**“ First you take a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes you.”**

F. Scott Fitzgerald, American author (1896-1940)

**“ If drinking is interfering with your work, you’re probably a heavy drinker. If work is interfering with your drinking, you’re probably an alcoholic.”**

Anonymous

Every few months, it seems, we read in the newspapers that scientists have once again proved that drinking is good for you. According to the latest study, conducted in Spain and published in the journal *Heart*, drinking up to one bottle of wine a day can reduce the risk of developing heart disease by half.

As soon as these studies are released, there is then normally some kind of backlash from a range of medical professionals, who warn the public yet again that these kinds of findings should not blind us to the very real dangers of irresponsible alcohol consumption.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the science, the way the media seize on these studies tells us something basic about our relationship with alcohol. It is very important to us. We want to believe that it’s good for us, yet somewhere deep inside we know that it is more complicated than that.

Archaeological evidence suggests that we invented beer before we invented bread, so alcohol clearly meets a very deep need. It helps us relax, it makes connecting with others a bit easier, it can help us have fun. In short, it is a part of what makes us human.

Yet anyone who has ever got into real difficulty with alcohol will tell you that it can also wreak havoc with both home and work life. They will often tell you that it does so in subtle, cumulative ways that can be difficult to spot until it’s all a bit too late. For some people, this makes it necessary to stop drinking altogether. For others, it requires a reassessment of both practical and emotional coping strategies. Either way, it’s a tricky area that no one need navigate alone. If you’d like to discuss any of the issues raised in this Hepsheet, the Adviceline is available for practical and emotional support.

## Facing the fear

As much as we would like to think that we can drink with impunity, the evidence is increasingly pointing to a rapidly accelerating health crisis.

According to Professor David Nutt, the former head of the government's drug advisory body, alcohol abuse represents a "tidal wave" that is engulfing the country. Expressing particular concern for the levels of drinking among young people, Nutt has said that rising rates of liver diseases, combined with numerous social problems and the huge number of deaths on the roads caused by alcohol, represent a "time bomb" that the government is not defusing.

The statistics do not make encouraging reading. NHS figures suggest that the number of alcohol-related deaths has doubled since the early 1990s to nearly 9,000 a year. Hospital admissions for conditions such as liver disease have also soared, leaving the NHS bill for alcohol abuse at £2.7bn a year.

The Department of Health has also estimated that about 17 million working days are lost to alcohol-related sickness each year, representing a total annual alcohol-related output loss to the UK economy of up to £6.4 billion.

But what does all of this mean for us? It's all very well trotting out terrifying statistics, but do they help us do anything different? Research into behaviour change is still divided over the effectiveness of scare tactics. While some public health officials believe that provoking fear is the quickest way of getting through to people, there is increasing consensus that scared people are more likely to retreat into apathy or denial.

So while a bit of anxiety might help things along, we're probably not going to do much about our drinking unless we're able to face up to what we need to do in simple manageable stages.

## Knowing your limits

The first thing we need to know is how much it is safe to drink. The current recommended daily limits for alcohol consumption are no more than 3-4 units per day for a man and no more than 2-3 units per day for a woman.

The units found in some standard drink sizes are listed below:



a can of strong  
lager/beer/bitter  
**2.2 units**



a pint of strong  
lager/beer/bitter  
**2.8 units**



a small glass  
of wine (125ml)  
**1.5 units**



a large glass  
of wine (250ml)  
**3 units**



a bottle  
of 'alcopops'  
**1.5 units**



a glass  
of spirits (25ml)  
**1 unit**



a bottle  
of wine  
**9 units**

## Spotting the warning signs

Once you know what you should be consuming, you have to start getting really honest with yourself about how you're actually consuming.

There's an old joke among addiction counsellors that "denial is not a river in Egypt". The point here is that very little can be achieved until one starts getting honest about one's relationship with alcohol. Denial of a problem, even if it is a potentially manageable one, can lead to far more serious difficulties down the line.

It can be difficult to admit a problem. For starters one might feel ashamed by a perceived failure to "handle one's drink", which can trigger shame. There can also be concerns about possible repercussions at work, which can trigger very real fears for one's livelihood. If you are beginning to drink problematically, however, you are faced with a problem that almost definitely will not go away on its own. Denial might work in the short-term, but it will ultimately fail as a strategy.

There is of course a broad spectrum of drinking behaviour, ranging from the occasional tittle to full-blown addiction, but it can be helpful to take a bit of time to wonder where one might lie along that particular line.

It is really important to note that potentially hazardous drinking might not appear to be having any adverse affect on you whatsoever. Hazardous drinking is defined as drinking over the recommended weekly limit. But it's also defined as drinking with the specific intention of getting drunk, i.e. binge drinking.

Other indicators of hazardous drinking include being unable to meet normal everyday obligations (at home or at work) because of alcohol, not remembering what happened the night before, and being advised by friends to cut down. Your health may not suffer immediately, but you are vulnerable to slipping into the next bracket, which is known as harmful drinking.

Signs of harmful drinking include the following.

- Difficulty in stopping drinking once you have started
  - Covering up how much you drink
  - The need to start drinking again to relieve withdrawal symptoms (such as shakes or headaches)
  - Needing more and more to achieve the same effect
  - A waning interest in other pleasures, activities or relationships
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- Continuing the habit, despite the harmful effects that it is having.

The end of the line is full-on dependence. Again, there are several levels to dependence, but the common denominator

is to have reached the point where one feels that one is unable to function without alcohol.

Withdrawal symptoms become ever more severe, and include hand tremors, sweating, nausea and seizures. Long-term alcohol abuse can cause serious health complications, affecting virtually every organ in the body. Alcohol-induced illnesses include liver cirrhosis, which is irreversible, along with an increased risk of heart disease, stroke and cancer.

On an emotional level, dependence can feed into a range of psychological states including depression, anxiety, irritability and restlessness. Ordinary life becomes increasingly empty and tiring, relationships that used to bring joy become dull and lifeless and interests that might once have nourished and fulfilled you become futile and tedious.

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## Who is at risk?

Many people spend years wondering if they need to do something about their drinking. The basic rule of thumb is this. If you think you have a problem with alcohol, you probably do. This will not necessarily be true in every single case, but if you feel that alcohol is beginning to occupy an unhealthy amount of space in your life, there is almost definitely something there that you need to address.

Although Alcoholics Anonymous as an organisation offers no formal definition of problem drinking, it talks of “a physical compulsion, coupled with a mental obsession”.

Put simply, if you find yourself drinking when you didn't mean to, or thinking about it when you don't want to, something has gone wrong.

Problem drinking can be hard to define, but research has identified certain risk factors. Steady drinking over time can lead to dependence. People who start drinking at an early age are also at risk, as are those who have alcoholics in their family. Emotional disorders such as severe depression and anxiety definitely put people at greater risk of becoming dependent on alcohol.

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## Moderate drinking

For people who do not believe that they have become dependent drinkers, there are several strategies that can help keep drinking safe and enjoyable.

- **Eat before you drink.** If you eat a big meal before you go out, alcohol will be absorbed more slowly into your system. Drinking on an empty stomach causes your blood-alcohol level to rise steeply. Eating on the way back from the pub has next to no effect!
- **Stay hydrated.** Alcohol is a diuretic that will dehydrate you. If you drink plenty of water, you will feel less thirsty and will drink more slowly. You'll also have less of a hangover in the morning.
- **Count your drinks.** It can be incredibly enlightening to actually count up how much one drinks each week. As soon as you know how much you are consuming, even if it's way too much, you are in a position to do something about it.
- **Don't drink before you go out.** It has become increasingly popular to stock up on cheap booze from the supermarket and get stuck in before heading out. This may be a cheaper way to get drunk, but it's a fast-track to problem drinking.

- **Alternate drinks.** One easy way of drinking less on a night out is to alternate alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic ones. If you drink rum and coke, for instance, order a regular coke before the next “proper” drink. Another way is to make sure you have a big glass of iced water on the go all evening. That way you can just sip from both, but you'll take twice as long to finish your alcoholic drink.
- **Get into an abstinence routine.** Try and not drink at all for at least two days a week. That way you give your system plenty of time to recover and you're not adding to your weekly total of units. Some people also find it helpful to give up completely from time to time, say, for a week. If you find it too hard to stop for any length of time that may be an important signal that it's time to get some outside help.
- **Never drink to fix emotions.** It is a very bad idea indeed to drink if you're feeling angry, sad, depressed or aggressive. It is much harder to control how much your drink when you're feeling emotionally vulnerable. Alcohol may temporarily sedate the feelings, but they will return with full force once you sober up.

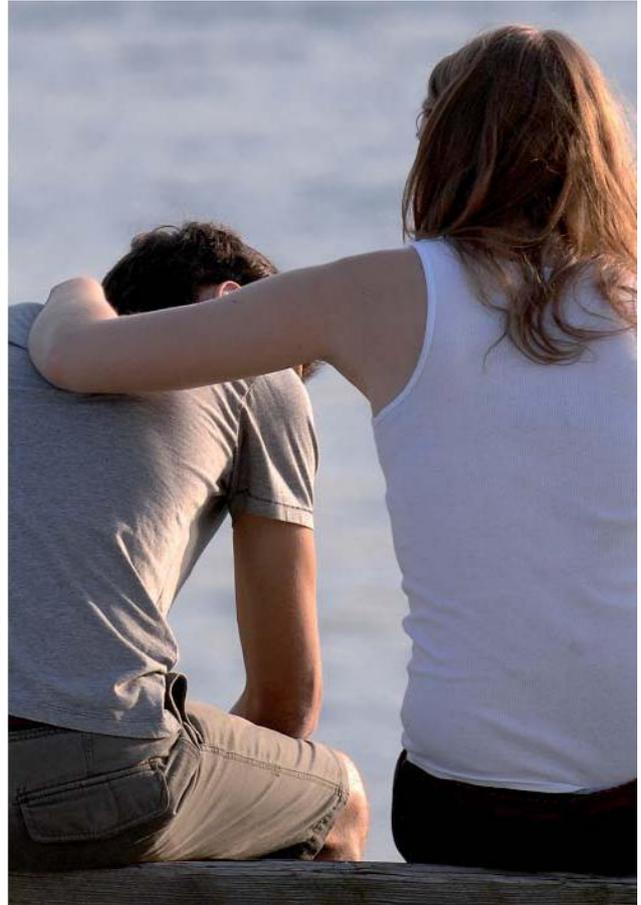
## Getting outside help

It is very common for people who struggle with alcohol to believe that their situation is hopeless, and here's why. Although drinking can be a very sociable activity, it can become a deeply lonely habit, cutting people off from supportive, nurturing human relationships and replacing them with a substance. This means that it can become increasingly difficult to reach out for support, still less actually to ask for help.

Drinkers can feel reluctant to talk about their difficulties because they feel ashamed at not being able to control their habit. There can also be real fear in the face of the social rejection that might follow any revelation of a problem.

Having said all of that, there are also millions of people who have successfully tackled their drinking problem and have lived to tell the tale! Some give up drinking completely and join support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Others are able to return to moderate drinking, but with renewed insights and deeper awareness.

Because alcohol misuse is such an isolating business, it is critically important to talk to someone if you feel you are losing the battle. The Adviceline is staffed by qualified and experienced counsellors, several of whom have particular expertise in alcohol issues. There is no need to suffer in silence. Give us a call.



## Books

### Drinking: A Love Story

by Caroline Knapp

### Beat the Booze: A Comprehensive Guide to Combating Drink Problems in All Walks of Life

by Edmund and Helen Tirbutt

### Living Sober

Alcoholics Anonymous

#### Further help and information

Hospitality Action – Helping our people in the Hospitality industry

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

0808 802 2111

24-hour Adviceline, providing emotional and practical support.

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