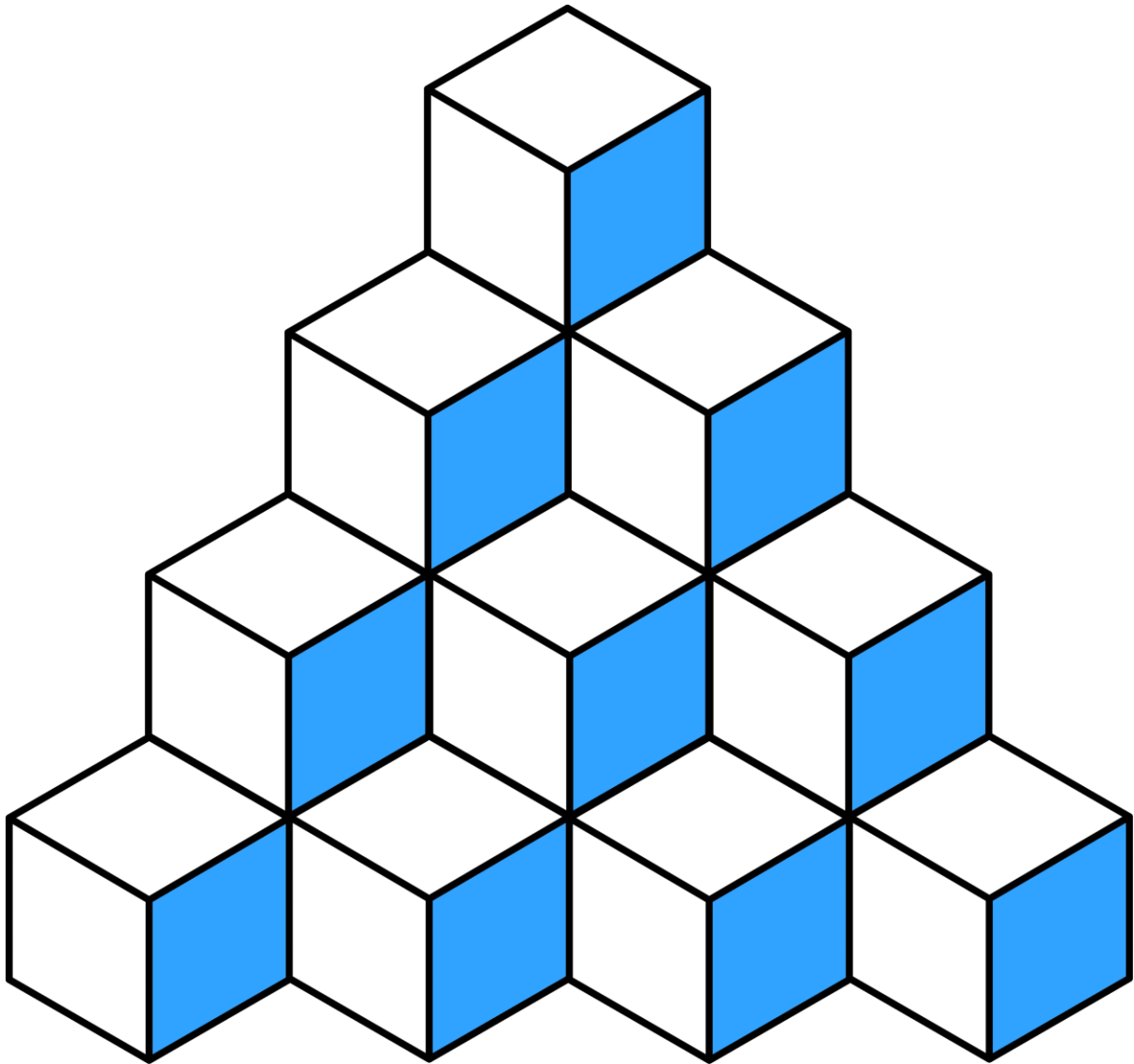


# Alcohol



# INFORMATION SHEET

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## Drinking problem?



Over 90% of the population drink alcohol. In moderation, alcohol presents few problems and may even have some health benefits. Drinking to excess, however, can be very harmful.

Globally, alcohol addiction is a serious problem. The rate of alcohol use disorder is especially high in Eastern Europe and in Russia, where more than 36% of males have alcohol use disorder. A little closer to home, the UK is eighth in the 'top ten' countries with the highest rate of alcoholism in females. See this [World Population Review](#) page for further details.

## Units of alcohol

Because alcoholic drinks come in many different strengths, we measure the strength of alcohol in **units**. One unit is 10 ml of pure alcohol. It takes an average adult around an hour to process one unit until there's none left in their bloodstream.

A 'unit' of alcohol is (roughly) the amount contained in a:

- **Standard measure** of spirits
  - **Half-pint** of normal strength beer
  - **Small glass** of wine or sherry
- = 1 unit**

The NHS advises that men shouldn't regularly drink more than 3-4 units of alcohol a day (about one-and-a-half pints of 4% strength beer), while women shouldn't regularly drink more than 2-3 units a day (about one 175 ml glass of wine). 'Regularly' means drinking every day, or most days of the week.

## Alcohol

The alcoholic content of drinks varies a lot. Some beers contain 3.5% alcohol, while stronger lagers can be 5% or 6% alcohol. Wine is typically 11% - 14% alcohol.

Just one pint of strong lager or a large glass of wine can contain more than three units of alcohol – the daily limit for women.

Remember that measures served at home are often much larger than those in bars, and some lagers and fortified wines can be much stronger than we might expect.

### Units and drinks

- 1 measure (25ml) of whisky, gin or vodka = 1 unit
- 1 small glass of sherry, martini or port = 1 unit
- 1 average glass of table wine = 1.5 units
- 1 pint of beer = 2 units
- 1 can of beer = 1.5 units
- 1 bottle of strong lager = 2.5 - 4 units
- 1 bottle (1 litre) of table wine = 12 units
- 1 bottle (750ml) of table wine = 9 units
- 1 bottle (700ml ) of whisky, gin or vodka = 26 - 35 units

## Alcohol

It's easy to underestimate the amount we drink. One way of keeping check is to record our consumption in a diary. Doing this from time to time can help keep a check on our drinking. It can also help highlight any times when we're more likely to drink than others.

There's a simple drink diary template you can print off and use at the end of this information sheet.

### Why drink?

Sometimes we might drink to relieve a depressed mood, to 'drown our sorrows'. Drinking too much can sometimes be a sign of **depression**.

It's important to understand the extent to which depression is causing excessive drinking, or excessive drinking is causing depression. If you think you're drinking too much and are feeling low, it's best to speak with a health professional to make sure you're getting the right help and support.

Alcohol is a depressant drug, it reduces our ability to face up to our problems and releases our inhibitions. For some people it plays an important part in overcoming **social anxiety**.

For some, alcohol releases powerful feelings of **self-hatred**, producing angry, aggressive or even suicidal behaviour. Many of us will know people who have become gloomy and bitter when drunk, yet have little memory of their mood the following day.

Some individuals drink alcohol as a way of bolstering their **self-confidence** or obtaining relief from **anxiety** or **distress**.

## Alcohol

Some people who are depressed and lack energy may use alcohol to help them keep going and to help **cope with life**. This is a very short-term solution because any benefits of the alcohol soon wear off, while drinking too much can easily become routine, harmful and difficult to change.

Alcohol produces tolerance, so we need a larger and larger dose to get the desired effect. This tolerance is a step on the road towards dependence or alcoholism.

Some think that alcohol is simply habit forming – drinking too much for too long produces cravings and the ‘habit’ of drinking. However, if you’re drinking to help you cope with the way you feel, you might need extra support to stop.

### Hangovers

Hangovers are unpleasant experiences. We wake feeling ill, anxious and jittery. We might feel guilty about the events of the previous night. If drinking bouts become habitual, there may well be trouble at home, conflicts with partners and family, the quality of our work deteriorates and we may feel unjustly criticised by partners, friends and colleagues. Eventually we may stop caring.

A hangover magnifies feelings of despair and self-loathing. When ‘hung over’ we judge ourselves harshly – we think ourselves stupid, foolish or weak. We may also have specific regrets about things that happened that we might bitterly regret.

Given these circumstances it’s not surprising that depression, even thoughts of suicide, can be common for someone who’s dependent on alcohol.

### Getting help

If your drinking is getting out of hand, or is causing problems for you or for other people, there are self-help measures which can help get you on the road to recovery.

Taking stock of your drinking habits is a good start. Keeping a careful diary of a couple of week's drinking is a useful way of doing this. A 'drink diary' can also help work out the relationship between events in the week and the times you drink more.

If your diary shows that drinking is outside sensible limits or causing problems, a good first plan is to set yourself a target to reduce your intake.

Identify the challenging situations when you might be tempted to drink. These might include the people you drink with, the time of day, and the feelings that trigger drinking. Take steps to avoid or deal with these situations. It often helps to involve a partner or friend in setting your goals and discussing progress.

It can be challenging to give up drinking completely. Try stopping and see how you feel without it. At first you may feel cravings or a sense of loss and some shakiness and restlessness. If these symptoms are troubling, it is wise to consult your health professional for help and advice about coming off alcohol and get help with withdrawal symptoms.

It's also best to check with a professional before stopping if you've been drinking heavily for some time, or if you have other health conditions.

## Alcohol

**Call the emergency services (999) if you have any of these symptoms when you stop drinking**

- **Severe vomiting**
- **Confusion or disorientation**
- **Fever**
- **Hallucinations**
- **Extreme agitation**
- **Seizures or fits**



If you think you might benefit from help with problem drinking, a quick Internet search can help you find local support groups.

You may also want to contact [Alcoholics Anonymous](#) (☎ 0800 9177650 in the UK), a voluntary agency such as [CAIS](#) (☎ 0345 06 121 12 in Wales), or a specialist alcohol treatment unit within the NHS - your doctor will be able to advise on these.



## Am I drinking too much? (AUDIT)

The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) was developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a way of screening for harmful drinking.

The AUDIT helps to identify alcohol dependence and some consequences of harmful drinking. It is designed for health care practitioners and a range of health settings; a version is available that can be self-administered by non-health professionals.

### **AUDIT INSTRUCTIONS**

Because alcohol use can affect your health and can interfere with certain medications and treatments, it is important that we ask some questions about your use of alcohol.

Your answers will remain confidential so please be honest.

Place an 'X' in one box that best describes your answer to each question.

Each question scores from zero to four. Add up your answers to get a total AUDIT score.

Total scores of '8' or more suggest harmful alcohol use.

# Alcohol

## AUDIT

		0	1	2	3	4	Score
1	How often do you have a drink containing alcohol?	Never	Monthly or less	2-4 times a month	2-3 times a week	4 or more times a week	
2	How many drinks containing alcohol do you have on a typical day when you are drinking?	1 or 2	3 or 4	5 or 6	7 to 9	10 or more	
3	How often do you have six or more drinks on one occasion?	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily or almost daily	
4	How often during the last year have you found that you were not able to stop drinking once you had started?	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily or almost daily	
5	How often during the last year have you failed to do what was normally expected of you because of drinking?	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily or almost daily	
6	How often during the last year have you needed a first drink in the morning to get yourself going after a heavy drinking session?	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily or almost daily	
7	How often during the last year have you had a feeling of guilt or remorse after drinking?	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily or almost daily	
8	How often during the last year have you been unable to remember what happened the night before because of your drinking?	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily or almost daily	
9	Have you or someone else been injured because of your drinking?	No		Yes, but not in the last year		Yes, during the last year	
10	Has a relative, friend, doctor, or other health care worker been concerned about your drinking or suggested you cut down?	No		Yes, but not in the last year		Yes, during the last year	
Total:							

### Urge surfing

'Urge surfing' means dealing with the urge, or craving to drink as though it were a wave in the ocean. Urges start small, grow over time to a peak, then reduce till they disappear.

Think about a confident swimmer - when they see a wave approaching, they relax into the wave and, with a minimum of effort, tread water until the wave passes. A less confident swimmer might become tense, fight the wave, and splash around so much that they go under.

The confident swimmer knows there's nothing to fear, so is much more relaxed and deals with the waves more easily.

Urge surfing involves dealing with the urge to drink, secure and confident in the knowledge that it will pass.

### Three steps to urge surfing

#### **1. Notice how you experience the urge or craving**

Sit on a chair with your feet on the floor and your hands in a comfortable position. Take a few deep breaths, and allow your attention to range through the body. Notice where you experience the craving and what the sensations are like. Notice each area where you experience the urge and tell yourself what you are experiencing. For example, you might say: 'The craving is in my mouth and in my stomach.'

### **2. Notice one area where you're experiencing the urge**

Notice the physical sensations in that area of the body. Do you feel hot, cold, heavy, numb? Are your muscles tense or relaxed? Describe the sensations to yourself and notice any changes that occur in the sensations. For example, you might say: 'My mouth feels dry. There is tension in my stomach. I keep swallowing. As I breathe, I can feel tension in my jaw.'

### **3. Surf the urge**

Notice any changes in the sensations in the body. Notice how the urge changes over time. After a few more minutes of simply noticing your urge, you will likely find that it fades. Stay with it. Don't try to stop the urge, change the urge, or distract yourself. Simply keep noticing.

Most people notice that after several minutes of urge surfing their craving fades noticeably. If it doesn't, don't give up - keep trying. This will likely take some practice.

The purpose of urge surfing is not to make the craving go away, rather to experience the urge in a different way.

As you practice urge surfing you'll become more familiar with your urges, cravings and impulses. You'll learn how to 'ride them out' until they fade. Most importantly, you will learn that you can tolerate them without automatically doing as your impulses demand.

### Sensible drinking tips

- Don't 'drown your sorrows'
- Take stock of your drinking habits - a diary helps
- Space your drinks with non-alcoholic drinks
- Use smaller glasses
- Don't drink on an empty stomach
- Have at least two drink-free days each week
- Don't suggest a drink to someone who is upset
- Offer non-alcoholic drinks as well as alcohol on social occasions
- Don't mix alcohol and drugs
- Alcohol is a drug - use it with care

### Professional help

Your first appointment with a professional can feel difficult, especially if you feel uncomfortable, embarrassed or ashamed. Many people find it helpful to write down what you want to talk about before they meet. Make a note of any questions or worries you might have. Some people find it helpful to take a friend or family member along.

Sometimes it can be hard to summon the courage to get help. A simple 'phone call to your GP can get things moving and start you on the road to recovery. If you're in Wales and you think alcohol might be a problem, you can contact the CALL helpline on 0800 132 737 or text 'help' to 81066 (UK).

## Deal with the difficult things

Putting off problems can make them mount up. Are there things in your life you're putting off dealing with? Might an advocate or some extra support help? The [Citizens Advice Bureau](#) can help with a range of issues from housing to money worries. Doing things to address our problems relieves the burden and makes us feel 'in control' again.

Ask yourself, 'what small thing could I do today that would help me begin to feel better about myself?' Make a note of your answer below.

## Self-help resources

There are many good books and websites that can help. Your GP, practice nurse or mental health practitioner will be able to recommend from a range of excellent and helpful material.

## Act now!

The sooner you get the help you may need, the sooner you'll feel better! Speak with your GP or a health professional for extra information or to get on the road to recovery today!

## Disclaimer

This material is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions. We have used all reasonable care in compiling the information but make no warranty as to its accuracy. We recommend you consult a doctor or other health care professional for the diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions, or if you are at all concerned about your health.

## Drink diary

### Why keep a drink diary?

- Monitoring any challenges, urges or temptations can help you find better ways of coping and alternatives to drinking
- Keeping track of your drinking helps you to know how well you're doing

A simple drinking diary to print and use is on the following page.



## Alcohol

	What's the most challenging situation you've faced today? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where were you?</li> <li>• What time was it?</li> <li>• Who was around?</li> <li>• What happened?</li> </ul>	What did you do to cope with it?	If you coped by drinking, how many units did you drink?	If you coped by drinking, what did it cost you?
Mon				
Tue				
Wed				
Thu				
Fri				
Sat				
Sun				

## References

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