

Alcohol.

Effects, dependence and health.



Effects of Alcohol

The effects of alcohol depend mostly on the amount that becomes concentrated in the blood. Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) simply measures what quantity of your blood is alcohol. The liver can process 1 unit of alcohol per hour - half a pint of regular strength beer or 1 glass of wine or 1 pub measure of spirits equals one unit. Not everyone will end up with the same BAC after drinking the same amount of alcohol. Other factors are involved:

- Sex - women will get a higher BAC than men after drinking the same amount
- Stomach contents - drinking on an empty stomach allows alcohol to pass quickly into the bloodstream and will have more immediate effects. A full stomach will slow this process down.

Dependence or addiction

Alcohol has serious consequences for physical and mental health due to its potential to damage nearly every part of the body. The government's current recommendation for healthy drinking limits are:

- For men: up to 3 units per day
- For women: up to 2 units per day

Note: these are daily limits and should not be 'saved up' and drunk in one go. Avoid alcohol completely if you are pregnant or taking medication.

Alcohol and fitness

Excessive drinking affects fitness in the following ways:

- Heart and lungs work less efficiently
- Causes muscle damage
- Increases risk of accidents and injuries
- Damages the immune system, making you more prone to infection
- Causes dehydration, making exercise dangerous and unpleasant
- Exercising when you still have alcohol in you can cause a heart attack, kidney failure, cramping and even convulsions
- 24 hours after heavy boozing you may think you have recovered, but your body has not.

Health benefits of alcohol

Research indicates people who regularly drink very modest amounts of alcohol live longer and enjoy better health. These effects have been shown particularly with red wine, where a small daily intake has been shown to improve cholesterol levels

Drinking more than the recommended limits can drastically reverse those benefits.

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Driving limits

In the UK the legal limit is 80mg of alcohol. This can be reached for some with as little as 1 pint of beer or 2 glasses of wine. If convicted of drink-driving you could lose your licence, pay a fine of up to £5,000, or spend up to 6 months in jail. If you cause a death, the jail sentence could be 10 years or more. Safest advice is not to mix drinking and driving at all.

Physical dependence on alcohol is caused by the body's adjustment to the routine presence of alcohol. It leaves the individual vulnerable to withdrawal symptoms if alcohol is not available.

Psychological dependence on alcohol can lead to difficulty in giving up alcohol and in severe cases to loss of control over drinking behaviour. The result can be the breakdown of normal social behaviour, severe mental and physical illness and premature death.

Dependence on alcohol can cause or aggravate:

- Depression
- Anxiety and stress

Do you have a problem?

You may if you:

- Believe you have to drink in order to have fun
- Always turn to alcohol to relieve uncomfortable feelings
- Drink more and more to get the same effect
- Forget what happened when you were drinking
- Can't predict whether or not you will get drunk
- Have trouble at work due to hangovers
- Need a drink in the morning as an 'eye-opener'
- Keep making promises to yourself or others that you will stop getting drunk
- You are regularly involved in public or domestic arguments when you have been drinking
- You drink alone, or hide your drinking from others. If more than one of the above applies, you may have a drink problem or be at risk of developing one. If this is the case, you really should seek advice.

Getting help

Alcoholics Anonymous

020 7833 0022

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Al-Anon Family Groups

Provides self-help sessions for people whose lives are affected by someone else's drinking.

020 7403 0888

Don't mix it!

A guide for employers on alcohol at work, IND(G)240L, available from HSE Books

0178 788 1165

www.hse.gov.uk

Alcohol Concern

Offers general information about alcohol and your nearest alcohol advisory service. Workplace alcohol services training pack is also available

020 7928 7377

www.alcoholconcern.org.uk