

Factsheet Alcohol

Key points

- Long-term alcohol use can increase the risk of serious health conditions.
- Alcohol can damage the liver which plays an important role in how the body processes anti-HIV drugs.
- Drinking alcohol may be more harmful for people with HIV than for HIV-negative people.



Alcohol is a drug and comes in many forms, including beer, cider, wine, ‘alcopops’, and spirits such as whisky, gin and vodka.

Alcohol is legally available in the UK from licensed outlets to people aged over 18 years and is enjoyed and used safely by many people.

However, alcohol is also a major cause of health and social problems, and, after tobacco, causes more deaths in the UK than any other drug.

What are the UK guidelines on alcohol?

New UK guidelines on alcohol were published in 2016. [The UK Chief Medical Officer’s recommendation](#) is that people should not regularly drink more than 14 units of alcohol a week. This applies to both men and women.

A unit of alcohol is around:

- a third of a pint of beer, lager or cider (at 5 to 6% alcohol)
- half a standard glass of wine (a standard glass is 175ml)
- a single measure of spirits (25ml)
- a small glass of sherry or port (50ml).

It is also recommended that you spread your alcohol intake over the week rather than saving up your units for one session – often called binge drinking – but also try to have some alcohol-free days each week.

Binge drinking can lead to poor co-ordination, vomiting, exaggerated emotional reactions

(including sadness, tearfulness, anger and aggression) and loss of memory. It can also lead to heart problems, alcohol poisoning and unconsciousness.

A good tool to help you calculate how many units of alcohol (and calories) there are in your drinks is: www.drinkaware.co.uk/understand-your-drinking/unit-calculator

Alcohol can contain a lot of calories so if you are trying to lose weight then you'll need to take into account how much you are drinking.

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can harm the unborn baby, so women who are pregnant or planning to become so, are advised to avoid alcohol.

Short-term effects of alcohol

Alcohol relaxes the brain and body which some people find pleasurable. Many people find that drinking helps relieve stress, encourages relaxation and acts as an appetite stimulant. However, its effects can also alter mood and lead to physical, psychological and social problems.

A hangover – headache, dry mouth, feeling sick and tired – is a very common consequence of heavy drinking the night before. These effects are caused by dehydration and toxicities so if you drink alcohol, you should drink plenty of water as well. Alternating between alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, drinking more slowly, not drinking on an empty stomach and eating something while you're drinking can also help to reduce a hangover and health risks related to alcohol.

"Drinking too much can make it harder for you to take your drugs in the right way and at the right time."

Even small amounts of alcohol can have an effect on your co-ordination, reactions and judgments, including influencing decisions you make about sex. You should never drink even small amounts of alcohol and drive, or operate machinery.

Extremely heavy drinking can lead to coma and even death.

Longer-term effects of alcohol

Long-term heavy alcohol consumption can increase the risk of serious health conditions. These include a wide range of cancers, heart disease, [high blood pressure](#), [stroke](#), liver disease, pancreatitis, depression, dementia, [sexual problems](#) and infertility. Drinking every day can also lead to physical and psychological dependence on alcohol.

People who drink heavily often don't eat well and this can cause further health problems.

Alcohol is a depressive drug and can cause or make [mental](#), [psychological](#) or [emotional](#)

problems worse.

Alcohol and HIV

There is [some evidence](#) that drinking alcohol is more harmful for people with HIV than people who don't have HIV and therefore sticking to the recommendations of no more than 14 units per week is particularly important.

Some studies have shown that people with HIV, who drink the same amount as HIV-negative people, have higher blood alcohol levels than those who don't have HIV. People who aren't on anti-HIV drugs have been found to have even [higher levels of alcohol](#) in their blood.

Drinking even a small amount of alcohol can speed up liver damage in people who have hepatitis B or C and heavy drinking can worsen the blood fat increases (such as [cholesterol](#)) caused by some anti-HIV drugs.

Drinking too much can make it harder for you to [take your drugs in the right way and at the right time](#). Studies have shown that people with HIV who drink alcohol are more likely to miss doses of their treatment than those who don't. Alcohol can cause vomiting. If you vomit within an hour of taking a dose of your anti-HIV drugs then you should retake the dose.

Alcohol can damage [the liver](#) and heavy drinking can cause hepatitis. It is particularly important that people with HIV take care of their liver, not least because it plays a vital role in how the body processes anti-HIV drugs. If your liver has been damaged by drinking too much alcohol, you are more likely to experience side-effects from some anti-HIV drugs.

There are no significant interactions between any of the currently available anti-HIV drugs and alcohol but alcohol can react badly with certain medicines. These include the antibiotics metronidazole, tinidazole and the anti-TB drugs rifampicin and rifabutin. Alcohol should be avoided if you are taking antidepressants and sedatives (such as *Valium*) and can interact with some other long-term medications. It is important to check with your pharmacist that alcohol is safe to drink with any medicines you are prescribed. It can also be dangerous to mix alcohol with illegal drugs.

Help with alcohol problems

Alcohol dependency is common in people living with HIV in the UK and heavy drinking may affect your immune system and slow down recovery from infections.

If you are concerned about your alcohol use, speak to a member of your healthcare team. There are also lots of organisations who can give you advice and support.

Alcohol Concern, one of the UK's largest alcohol charities, can be contacted via www.alcoholconcern.org.uk, or phone Drinkline on 0300 123 1110.

The website [Drinkaware](#) provides a list of support services that may be helpful.

Find out more

Nutrition Information booklet

The liver Simple factsheet

HIV & hepatitis Information booklet