



Alcohol: brief advice and information

Information for patients from the Alcohol and Substance Misuse Team

Everyone who drinks over 14 units a week would benefit from reducing their alcohol intake. At East Kent Hospitals we want to support our patients and community to reduce their alcohol intake and improve their health. The aim of this leaflet is to:

- increase your understanding of how drinking too much alcohol affects your health; and
- to give practical guidance and tips to safely cut down alcohol intake.

Please take the time to read through this leaflet. Contact our specialist Alcohol Substance Misuse team if you have any questions or would like further support to reduce your drinking.

Why have I been given this leaflet?

We screen most adult inpatients for their use of alcohol and substances. This does not mean you have a problem, but information and advice can help make a difference, and prevent future problems.

If you have a concern about your use of alcohol or drugs, our specialist team of nurses are here to help. All referrals are made in complete confidence.

If you would like to be referred to the team as an inpatient, please let the medical staff who are treating you know, so we can make an appointment.

Alcohol guidelines (2016) advise that:

Lower risk drinking for men and women

- Drink no more than 14 units per week.
- Include at least three alcohol free days each week.
- Avoid drinking more than 2 to 3 units on the days that you do drink.

If you do drink as much as 14 units per week, spread how much you alcohol you drink over at least 3 days or more.

What is alcohol dependence?

- Alcohol dependence is defined as a 'craving, tolerance or preoccupation with alcohol and continued drinking in spite of harmful consequences'.
- Individuals who are alcohol dependent are not always able to stop drinking after just one drink. When they are not drinking, individuals can have withdrawal syndrome. This can include symptoms such as nausea (feeling sick), tremors (shaking), or anxiety (stress and worry).
- **Everyone who drinks over 14 units a week would benefit from reducing their alcohol intake.**

What are the health risks if I drink more than 14 units per week?

Drinking more than 14 units of alcohol a week can cause the following health risks.

- **Physical and mental health issues**

Studies show that physical and mental health risks increase when an individual regularly drinks more than 14 units of alcohol per week. The risks can include the following.

- Mouth, throat, oesophageal and bowel / bladder, stomach cancers.
 - Liver disease leading to decompensation of the liver.
 - Poor sleep (insomnia).
 - Vitamin B1 deficiency leading to memory loss.
 - Men: impotence (not able to get or keep an erection).
 - Heart disease.
 - Hypertension (raised or high blood pressure).
 - Stroke.
 - Anxiety and depression.
 - Aggression.
 - Relationship problems.
 - Alcohol related brain disease.
 - Alcohol dependency.
 - Risky behaviour.
 - Pancreatitis (inflamed (swollen) pancreas).
 - Varices (enlarged or swollen veins).
 - Death.
- **Complications during and after surgery**

Drinking too much alcohol increases the risk of developing surgical complications. These can include infections, bleeding, cardiac arrhythmias, and confusion following surgery. If you can safely stop drinking one month before surgery, this significantly reduces these risks and will help with your recovery.

How can I calculate my weekly intake of units?

- A bottle of 12% wine (70cl) = 9 units (630 calories).
- A large 250ml 13% glass of wine = 3 units (210 calories).
- A double vodka 37.5% 50ml = 1.8 units (104 calories).
- A bottle of spirits 37.5% (75cl) = 28 to 32 units (1650 calories).
- A 440ml can of 5% beer / cider / lager = 2.2 units (187 calories).
- A 440ml can of 7.5% lager / cider = 4 units (230 calories).
- A pint of 4% beer / cider / lager = 2.3 units (180 calories).

(Approximate number of units and calories in each drink).

For help calculating your alcohol intake, please go to the **NHS Alcohol Units** web page.
(<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-advice/calculating-alcohol-units/>)

How can I safely stop drinking?

If you drink more than one alcoholic drink every day, it is very important that you do not suddenly stop. Stopping suddenly can lead to withdrawal symptoms, as your body has been used to a certain level of alcohol. If you are unsure whether this applies to you, please ask a member of staff to get in touch with our specialist team.

If you stop drinking for several hours or days and start to feel unwell, this could mean that you are dependant on alcohol and have symptoms of alcohol withdrawal.

If you have moderate or severe alcohol dependency, you will need professional support to safely reduce the amount of alcohol you drink.

- **If you are an inpatient**, please ask a member of staff to contact our Alcohol Substance Misuse team.
- **If you are not an inpatient**, please contact your local community Alcohol Service to arrange an appointment.

You will have a formal assessment, where you and a healthcare professional can plan and arrange appropriate support to safely reduce your alcohol consumption.

If you have moderate or severe alcohol dependency, you may be offered a social or psychological intervention, which focuses on your alcohol related behaviour. This can include going to community groups and using local support networks, or attending counselling sessions. Your healthcare professional may also offer treatment plans for alcohol detoxification and medication to support you going forward.

What is alcohol withdrawal syndrome?

Alcohol withdrawal syndrome can happen when people who drink alcohol every day suddenly reduce or stop drinking. It can be a life-threatening condition, with symptoms such as anxiety and shakiness. These symptoms can lead onto severe complications, such as seizures and delirium tremens (also known as DTs). Ask for medical advice if you think you are experiencing alcohol withdrawals.

Alcohol withdrawal syndrome can be safely managed by medical professionals. It can also be avoided if you follow the advice below (see **Where do I start?**), and safely cut down on how much alcohol you drink.

If you or your family have any concerns contact 111 and ask for further advice. Call 999 if you:

- witness a seizure
- believe you have fainted
- have found yourself on the floor and are unsure of what has happened to you
- become confused
- start to hallucinate (see or hear things that are not there)
- develop double vision; or
- you become unsteady on your feet.

Where do I start?

- Any reduction in the amount of alcohol you drink will benefit your health.
- Start by keeping a diary of everything you drink and the units in each drink.
- Aim to slowly reduce your alcohol intake. You can do this by:
 - changing to a lower strength of drink
 - reducing the number of drinks you have per day
 - spacing out drinks throughout the day
 - avoiding drinking alcohol before going out
 - changing to smaller glass or add a mixer to slow down how quickly you drink it
 - drinking at your own pace, do not feel pressured to keep up with others.
- Avoid drinking before going out, this is known as pre-loading.
- Remember to have something to eat before going out for drinks. Eating pasta, pizza, burgers, wholemeal bread, or brown rice are all good options. These **may** help to slow down the absorption of alcohol in your stomach.
- Keep well hydrated. Drink a glass of water or a soft drink between each alcoholic drink.
- Set a limit before you start drinking, and stick to it. **Remember it's ok to say no.**

- Ask a friend or family member to help you cut down. Share a diary with them. Ask if they can help you measure drinks, monitor what you drink, and keep the alcohol with them.
- If you are a heavy drinker or alcohol dependant, cut down how much alcohol you drink by 10% every 4 days. For help with reducing your alcohol intake, please look at the **NHS Alcohol Units** web page. (<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-advice/calculating-alcohol-units/>)

What support is available while I am an inpatient in hospital?

If you are an inpatient in one of our hospitals, your healthcare professional can refer you to our Alcohol Substance Misuse team. The team offer non-biased clinical inpatient support for patients with alcohol dependency. They can:

- support ward teams with appropriate withdrawal treatments; and
- support a referral to community services, such as the Forward Trust (<https://www.forwardtrust.org.uk/>).

Is it safe to drink during pregnancy?

No. Do not drink alcohol during pregnancy. It is considered unsafe for your welfare and your developing foetus (baby). The UK's Chief Medical Officer recommends that if you are pregnant or planning to become pregnant, the safest approach is to not drink alcohol at all, to keep risks to your baby to a minimum.

When you drink during pregnancy especially in the first three months, alcohol passes from your blood through to the placenta and into your baby. A baby's liver is one of the last organs to develop, it does not begin to mature until the later stages of pregnancy.

Miscarriage, premature birth, and low birth weight are linked to drinking alcohol during the first three months of pregnancy.

Drinking heavily throughout pregnancy can cause a serious condition called foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). FAS can affect your baby's development, and cause the following symptoms.

- Distinct facial features.
- Poor growth.
- Behavioural and learning problems.

Useful contact numbers

- **Alcoholics Anonymous**
National Helpline: 08009 177650
- **Drug and Alcohol Service: Forward Trust Change Up**
(<https://www.forwardtrust.org.uk/service/change-up/>)
For adults aged 18 to 30 who would like support managing their drug and alcohol use.
Telephone: 03001 231186 (open 7 days a week; 24 hours a day)

- **Narcotics Anonymous** (alcohol as well as illicit drug use)
Telephone: 0207 2514007
National helpline: 0300 991212
- **OneYou Kent: Drink less** (<https://www.kent.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/health/one-you-kent/drink-less>)
- **Release the Pressure (mental health support)**
Text: Kent to 85 25 8
Telephone: 08001 070160 (24 hour helpline)
- **The Safe Haven Thanet** (mental health support for people over 16 years old)
Telephone: 07850 655877 or 07483 918233 (6pm to 11pm)
Telephone: 08001 070160 (24 hour helpline)
- **Samaritans**
Telephone: 11 61 23
- **We Are With You** (for the over 50s)
Telephone: 08008 010750
- **We Are With You** (for the under 17s, also signposting for the under 21s)
Telephone: 01795 500881

References

1. Department of Health and Social Care. Chapter 12: Alcohol. Updated 9th November 2021.
(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/delivering-better-oral-health-an-evidence-based-toolkit-for-prevention/chapter-12-alcohol#:~:text=The%20UK%20CMOs%E2%80%99%20low%20risk%20guidelines%20for%20alcohol>)
2. Badii, C. Alcohol withdrawal syndrome: symptoms, causes, treatment, and more. Healthline. Updated 18th December 2023. (<https://www.healthline.com/health/alcoholism/withdrawal>)
3. NHS. Drinking alcohol while pregnant. (<https://www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/keeping-well/drinking-alcohol-while-pregnant/>)
4. Drinkaware. Alcohol withdrawal. (<https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/facts/health-effects-of-alcohol/general-health-effects/alcohol-withdrawal-symptoms>)
5. Alcohol Health Alliance. Why drinking less alcohol can aid better recovery from surgery.
(<https://ahauk.org/why-drinking-less-alcohol-can-aid-better-recovery-from-surgery/>)
6. Centre for Perioperative Care. Alcohol moderation. (<https://www.cpoc.org.uk/guidelines-resources-resources/alcohol-moderation>)

What do you think of this leaflet?

We welcome feedback, whether positive or negative, as it helps us to improve our care and services.

If you would like to give us feedback about this leaflet, please fill in our short online survey. Either scan the QR code below, or use the web link. We do not record your personal information, unless you provide contact

details and would like to talk to us some more.

Giving feedback about this leaflet



<https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/MDOBU4/>

If you would rather talk to someone instead of filling in a survey, please call the Patient Voice Team.

- **Patient Voice Team**

Telephone: 01227 868605

Email (ekhuft.patientvoice@nhs.net)

This leaflet has been produced with and for patients.

Please let us know:

- If you have any accessibility needs; this includes needing a hearing loop or wanting someone to come with you to your appointment.
- If you need an interpreter.
- If you need this information in another format (such as Braille, audio, large print or Easy Read).

You can let us know this by:

- Visiting the Trust web site (<https://www.ekhuft.nhs.uk/ais>).
- Calling the number at the top of your appointment letter.
- Adding this information to the Patient Portal (<https://pp.ekhuft.nhs.uk/login>).
- Telling a member of staff at your next appointment.

Any complaints, comments, concerns or compliments, please speak to a member of your healthcare team. Or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service on 01227 783145 or email (ekh-tr.pals@nhs.net).

Patients should not bring large sums of money or valuables into hospital. Please note that East Kent Hospitals accepts no responsibility for the loss or damage to personal property, unless the property has been handed into Trust staff for safe-keeping.

Further patient information leaflets are available via the East Kent Hospitals' web site (<https://www.ekhuft.nhs.uk/patient-information>).

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