Alcohol and Depression

HELP IS AT HAND

Information for the general public

The Royal College of Psychiatrists.
This leaflet is written for:

- anyone who feels depressed and suspects they may be drinking too much.

- anyone who suspects they may be drinking too much and is feeling depressed.

- friends, family or colleagues of anyone who is both depressed and drinking.

It contains some basic facts about alcohol and depression, how to help yourself, how to get further help, and where to find more information.
Alcohol and us
More than 9 out of 10 people in the United Kingdom drink alcohol. It is part of our culture and we feel comfortable with it. Moderate drinking doesn’t cause many problems. However, over the last 30 years, society has become wealthier and alcohol has become cheaper. We are starting to drink at a younger age and we are drinking more. More than 1 in 4 men, and about 1 in 7 women are drinking more than is medically safe for them. According to the Department of Health, around 1 in 8 men is physically addicted to alcohol.

How does alcohol affect the brain?
Tolerance
Alcohol is like many other drugs that act on the brain, such as tranquillisers. If we drink it regularly, we find that it has less effect on us. We need to drink more and more to get the effect we want. This is called ‘tolerance’ and is a powerful part of becoming addicted to alcohol.

Alcohol can also lead to:
- **Dementia** - memory loss, rather like Alzheimer’s dementia.
- **Psychosis** - long-term drinkers can start to hear voices.
- **Dependence** - if you stop drinking, you get withdrawal symptoms such as shaking, nervousness and (sometimes) seeing things that aren’t there.
- **Suicide** - 40% of men who try to kill themselves have had a long-standing alcohol problem.
  - 70% of those who succeed in killing themselves have drunk alcohol before doing so.
What is the connection between depression and alcohol?

We know that there is a connection – self-harm and suicide are much more common in people with alcohol problems. It seems that it can work in two ways.

- If we drink too much, too regularly, we are more likely to become depressed.

Regular drinking can leave us tired and depressed. There is evidence that alcohol changes the chemistry of the brain itself and that this increases the risk of depression.

Hangovers create a cycle of waking up feeling ill, anxious, jittery and guilty.

Regular drinking can make life depressing - family arguments, poor work, unreliable memory and sexual problems.

- If we drink alcohol to relieve anxiety or depression, we will become more depressed.

Alcohol helps us to forget our problems for a while. It can help us to relax and overcome any shyness. It can make talking easier and more fun, whether in the pub, a club or at a party. It is a very effective way of feeling better for a few hours.

If you are depressed and lacking in energy, it can be tempting to use alcohol to help you keep going and cope with life. The problem is that it is easy to slip into drinking regularly, using it like a medication. The benefits soon wear off, the drinking becomes part of a routine, and you have to keep drinking more to get the same effect.
How much alcohol is too much?
Some drinks are stronger than others. The easiest way to work out how much we are drinking is to count “units” of alcohol. 1 unit is 10 grammes of alcohol - the amount in a standard pub measure of spirits, a half pint of normal strength beer or lager, or a small glass of wine.

If a man and woman of the same weight drink the same amount of alcohol, the woman will have a much higher amount in her bodily organs than the man. So, unfair as it may seem, the safe limit is lower for women (14 units per week) than for men (21 units per week).

“Binge” drinking
How much you drink at one time is also important. These “safe limits” assume that our drinking is spread out through the week.

In any one day, it is best for a man to drink no more than 4 units and for a woman to drink no more than 3 units. Drinking over 8 units in a day for men, or 6 units for women is known as ‘binge drinking’.

You can drink above the safe limit on one night, but still remain within your “safe” limit for the week. There is some evidence that, even a couple of days of binge drinking, may start to kill off brain cells. This was previously thought only to happen with people who drank continuously for long periods of time. Binge drinking also seems to be connected with an increased risk of early death in middle aged men.
Guide to units of alcohol

This table below gives a rough guide to the amount of alcohol found in standard measures of different drinks.

These guidelines are approximate and may vary depending on the brand chosen and the size of measure. All alcohol sold in the UK above 1.2% ABV (Alcohol By Volume) should state how strong it is in percentages (%). The higher the percentage, the more alcohol it has in it. Pub measures are generally rather smaller than the amount we pour ourselves at home.

### Beer, Cider & Alcopops

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength ABV</th>
<th>Half Pint</th>
<th>Pint</th>
<th>Bottle /Can 330ml</th>
<th>Bottle /Can 500ml</th>
<th>Bottle 1 litre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ordinary strength beer, lager or cider eg. Draught beer, Heinekin, Woodpecker</td>
<td>3-4%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Export” strength beer, lager or cider eg. Stella, Budweiser, Kronenbourg, Strongbow</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra strong beer, lager or cider eg. Special Brew, Diamond White, Tennants Extra</td>
<td>8-9%</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcopops eg. Bacardi Breezer, Smirnoff Ice, Reef, Archers, Hooch</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.7</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Wines and Spirits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength ABV</th>
<th>Small glass/pub measure</th>
<th>Wine glass</th>
<th>Bottle 750 ml</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table Wine</td>
<td>10-12%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortified wine (sherry, martini, port)</td>
<td>15-20%</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirits (whisky, vodka, gin)</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>1</td>
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</table>
How much am I drinking?
Most of us under-estimate the amount we drink. One way to check on this is to keep a diary of how much we drink over the course of a week. This can give us a clearer idea of whether we are drinking too much. It can also help to highlight any risky situations - regular times, places and people when we seem to drink more.

Diary table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DAY</th>
<th>HOW MUCH?</th>
<th>WHEN?</th>
<th>WHERE?</th>
<th>WHO WITH?</th>
<th>UNITS</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Monday</td>
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<td>Saturday</td>
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<td>Sunday</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total for week</td>
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</table>

Warning signs
- You regularly use alcohol as a way of coping with feelings of anger, frustration, anxiety or depression.
- You regularly use alcohol to feel confident.
- You get hangovers regularly.
- Your drinking affects your relationships with other people.
- Your drinking makes you feel disgusted, angry or suicidal.
- Other people tell you that when you drink you become gloomy, embittered or aggressive.
- You need to drink more and more to feel good.
- You stop doing other things to spend more time drinking.
- You start to feel shaky and anxious the morning after drinking the night before.
- You drink to stop these feelings.
- You start drinking earlier in the day.

**What if I am drinking too much?**

- Set yourself a target to reduce the amount of alcohol you drink.
- Avoid any high-risk drinking situations (check out your diary).
- Work out other things you can do instead of drinking.
- Involve your partner or a friend. They can help to agree a goal and keep track of your progress.

We know that many people are able to cut down their drinking after discussing it with their GP. Some people can stop suddenly without any problems. Others may have withdrawal symptoms - craving, shakiness and restlessness. If this happens, your GP can help.
Depression and stopping drinking

There is evidence that, although many heavy drinkers feel depressed when they are drinking, most will feel better within a few weeks of stopping. So, it is usually best to tackle the alcohol first, and then consider dealing with the depression if it has not lifted after a few weeks.

After a few alcohol-free weeks, you will probably feel fitter and less depressed. Friends and family may find you easier to get on with. If your feelings of depression lift, this strongly suggests that they were caused by the drinking.

If the depression is still with you after four weeks of not drinking, talk to your GP or about further help. It may be useful to talk about your feelings, particularly if your depression seems linked to relationship problems, unemployment, divorce, bereavement or some other loss. Counselling may be helpful.

If the depression does not lift and is particularly severe, your general practitioner may recommend a talking treatment called ‘cognitive psychotherapy’ or suggest antidepressant medication. In either case, you will need to stay away from alcohol and go on with the treatment for several months. There are some medications used to reduce the craving for alcohol, but these are usually only prescribed by a specialist.

Treatment for both alcohol problems and depression can be very successful. It helps to regularly see someone you can trust, either your own doctor, counsellor or a specialist psychiatrist. Changing our habits and style of life is always a challenge and takes time to achieve.
Dos and Don’ts of Drinking safely

- Do sip your drink slowly – don’t gulp it down.
- Do space your drinks with a non-alcoholic drink in between.
- Don’t drink on an empty stomach. Have something to eat first.
- Don’t drink every day. Have two or three alcohol-free days in the week.
- Do provide non-alcoholic drinks as well as alcohol on social occasions.
- Do ask your doctor or chemist if it is safe to drink with any medicine that you have been prescribed.
- Do keep to the target (amount of alcohol per week) you have set yourself.
- Do check your drinking every few weeks with your drinking diary.
Finding Help

If you just can’t stop drinking, or can’t keep it to a safe level, you can get help from:

- Your general practitioner
- Self help groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or AlAnon
- Voluntary alcohol agencies
- Specialist treatment in the NHS - your general practitioner who will also know how to contact specialist services.

Other useful leaflets produced by the Royal College of Psychiatrists include: Depression, Depression in Older Adults, Manic Depression and Men Behaving Sadly, Physical Illness and Mental Health. We also have factsheets on Antidepressants and Cognitive Therapy. They can all be downloaded from our website: www.rcpsych.ac.uk. For a catalogue of our materials for the general public, contact the Leaflets Department, Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG. Tel: 020 7235 2351 ext.259; Fax: 020 7235 1935 or e-mail: leaflets@rcpsych.ac.uk.

References


Organisations that can help

**Depression Alliance:** 35 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7J B. Tel: 020 7633 0557 Fax: 020 7633 0559. www.depressionalliance.org. Information, help and advice for those affected by depression.

**Alcoholics Anonymous:** Tel: 0845 769 7555 (charged at local call rates; open 24 hours every day). www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

**Al-Anon Family Groups UK & Eire:** 61 Great Dover Street, London SE1 4YF. Tel: 020 7403 0888 Fax: 020 7378 9910. www.al-anon.org.uk. Self Help for friends and families of alcoholics.

**Recommended Reading**


**Websites**

Alcohol Concern www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

Institute of Alcohol Studies www.ias.org.uk

Royal College of Psychiatrists www.rcpsych.ac.uk

NHS Health Education Authority www.wrecked.co.uk/index2.html

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