

Many people enjoy alcohol and drink sensibly. Alcohol is so widely used that we sometimes forget that if we have too much, it can cause harm to the body and mind.

Some facts and figures

In the UK, two out of every five men drink more than the recommended limit at least once a week. Drinking more than the sensible limit can cause problems for men at any age, not just later in life. A quarter of deaths in men under the age of 34 can be attributed to alcohol. In 2004, 1,515 men in Scotland died of alcohol-related causes – almost three times more than the number for women.

Macho drinking cultures

Men can be their own worst enemy when it comes to drink and tend to bring out the worst in each other. Why, for example, should it be 'manly' to be able to drink far in excess of what's sensible? And why, if one person in a group is trying not to drink, should it be acceptable to give them a hard time?

Alcohol and physical health

Drinking more than the sensible limit has several health implications for men.

- **Weight gain**

Alcohol can be a significant source of calories, for example, the average pint of beer has 182 calories.

- **Fertility and impotence**

Alcohol can reduce male fertility by lowering sperm counts and testosterone levels. More than 80% of men who drink heavily are believed to have serious sexual side effects, including impotence, sterility or loss of sexual desire.

- **Appearance**

Excessive long term drinking in men decreases the amount of testosterone produced in the body, which causes shrunken testicles, enlarged breasts and hair loss. Heavy drinking can also worsen skin disorders like rosacea, which causes the blood vessels in the face to expand, making your face permanently redder.

- **Gout**

Gout is an arthritic condition that causes inflammation, swelling and pain in the joints. Gout is most common in men aged 30 to 60 and is linked to drinking alcohol.

- **Brain and nervous system**

Alcohol is a depressant, which means that it slows down the brain and affects the body's responses. Continued excessive drinking can cause memory loss and alcohol related brain damage.

- **Stroke**

A twenty-year study of 6,000 Scottish men found that those drinking more than the recommended limit were more likely to die of a stroke.

- **Other health implications**

More generally, drinking just a bit more than you should can, over time, seriously harm your liver. Binge drinking especially is a risk factor in developing heart disease and alcohol is the leading cause of throat and mouth cancer, second only to tobacco. It's also linked to bowel and liver cancer. Drinking too much can also cause bone disease, inflammation of the pancreas, an irritable stomach and type 2 diabetes.

Alcohol and behaviour

Alcohol can change our mood, which affects our behaviour. It intensifies emotions, affects our judgement and lowers our inhibitions. Even small amounts of alcohol can amplify our emotions, and this applies to both positive and negative feelings. For example it can make us more relaxed, confident and merry or, on the flipside, more aggressive, depressed or suicidal.

When our bodies deal with the rapid increase in alcohol into the bloodstream, and flushes it out again, the effect of this can leave us feeling jumpy, anxious and depressed.

Even the next day our behaviour can be affected by this mood swing and for some, this leads to drinking again to dampen the feelings. This can increase general feelings of anxiety and depression.

Alcohol and mental health

Sometimes people use alcohol as a way of coping with difficulties in their life, which can lead to more problems. Alcohol can increase anxiety and depression because it uses up our stores of the natural brain chemicals that help us to feel calm and lift our mood.

Even more worryingly, there is a strong link between alcohol and suicide. Research shows that 70% of men who go through with suicide are found to have drunk alcohol before doing so. Scotland has one of the highest suicide rates in Europe, particularly among young men.

Coping with stress

Stress happens when any difficulties or challenges in our lives overtake our ability to cope. Some of the ways of coping with stress turn out to be unhealthy, such as drinking alcohol. Some tips for healthy ways to cope:

- **Exercise** – Exercise helps to improve your fitness, moods, physical health and concentration. Try to do get physical exercise for 30 minutes, three times a week.
- **Doing something you enjoy** – Taking part in something engaging that takes your mind off any worries can help you to feel better, like watching a film, playing a musical instrument or taking part in a sport.
- **Talking to someone** – Talking over your worries can help put things into perspective and reduce stress. You could talk to a trusted friend or a confidential helpline such as Breathing Space (details overleaf).
- **Learning to say 'no'** – Saying 'yes' to everything may result in you reaching breaking point and being unable to do anything at all. Be aware of your limits about how much you are able to take on in your life and let people know.
- **Relaxation** – Try to factor in enough relaxation time into your routine, especially during busy or stressful times.



Tayside Council on Alcohol
www.alcoholtayside.com
01382 223965



Fife Alcohol Support Service
www.fife-alcohol-support.org.uk
01592 206200

This factsheet has been developed by colleagues from TCA and FASS to support positive changes in risky alcohol use ... partners in the project wish to acknowledge the experience and information resources used within the network of local councils on alcohol which have informed this resource.

TCA receives funding from NHS Tayside, Angus Council, Dundee City Council, Perth and Kinross Council. FASS receives core funding from NHS Fife and Fife Council.

Other National Information and help available can be accessed through the following organisations:

Alcohol Focus Scotland
www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous
www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk
0845 769 7555

Breathing Space
www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk
0800 83 85 87

www.drinkaware.co.uk