

FACT SHEET:

Alcohol & Nutrition

How does alcohol affect nutrient intake?

If you are drinking more alcohol than the recommended safe amount, the essential nutrients that your body needs to stay healthy may be affected.

This is because drinking alcohol can:

- Result in eating unhealthy foods, which means fewer nutrients in your body.
- Affect how nutrients are absorbed and used by your body.

What are the symptoms of drinking too much alcohol?

When there is a lack of nutrients in your body as a result of drinking, it can cause the following symptoms:

Increased risk of infections	Nausea	Depression
Pins and needles	Poor concentration	Muscle wasting
Numbness or lack of feeling	Poor mobility	Confusion
Weight loss	Diarrhoea	Anxiety

Eating disorders and alcohol

Some people exhibit a disturbing blend of compulsive behaviours, in which drinking too much alcohol is combined with eating disorders. Sometimes referred to as 'Drunkorexia', the condition can involve binge drinking combined with the self-imposed starvation typical of anorexia nervosa. Or it may involve purging which is a characteristic of bulimia nervosa in attempts to reduce calorie intake and offset calories consumed through alcohol.

What nutrients do I need?

There are several nutrients that are likely to be lacking in your body as a result of drinking alcohol. These include:

1. Folic Acid (also known as Folate) is one of the B-group of vitamins, which helps produce and maintain new cells. A lack of folic acid in the body can limit the growth and repair of all cells and tissues in the body and cause anaemia, gastrointestinal upset, memory problems, impaired brain and nerve functions.

Vitamin B12, which maintains healthy nerve cells and red blood cells and takes care of the brain and central nervous system. Studies have shown that both moderate and heavy alcohol consumption will affect vitamin B12 levels. A slight deficiency of vitamin B12 can lead to anaemia, fatigue, mania, and depression, while a long term deficiency can potentially cause permanent damage to the brain and central nervous system.

2. Vitamin A, which is needed for vision, to regulate the immune system, for bone growth, for reproduction, cell division. It is essential for growth and healthy skin and hair. Symptoms of vitamin A deficiency are susceptibility to infections, poor vision, rough, dry, scaly skin, loss of smell and appetite, and defective growth of teeth and gums.
3. Calcium, which is needed for healthy blood vessels, muscles and nervous system.
A lack of calcium deficiency in the body can lead to osteoporosis and rickets.
4. Thiamine (vitamin B1), which is essential to keep you physically and mentally healthy. Heavy drinkers are at the risk of developing Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome which is a loss of short-term memory. Other symptoms of a lack of thiamine include brain deterioration, depression, emotional agitation, poor vision, tingling or burning of feet, numbness in fingers, hands, feet and toes, tiredness, decreased appetite and digestion, constipation, abdominal and chest pains and cardiac deterioration.



Can a healthy diet make a difference?

In order for your body to work properly and to stay healthy, you need food and non-alcoholic drinks that provide you with essential vitamins and minerals. A healthy diet consists of:

- Fruit and vegetables
- Bread, cereals & potatoes
- Meat, fish, eggs, beans and pulses
- Milk, dairy and dairy alternatives

The Eatwell Guide

Use the Eatwell Guide to help you get the balance right. It shows how much of what you eat should come from each food group.



Source: Public Health England in association with the Welsh government, Food Standards Scotland and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland

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our Helpline on 01592 206 200 or visit www.fassaction.org.uk

Fruit and vegetables contain vitamins that help your body to balance your moods. They also contain vitamins A, E and C and contain anti-oxidants which help your body to fight against infection. Aim to have five portions of fruit and vegetables per day. This can be fresh, frozen, tinned or dried fruit.

Bread, cereals and potatoes contain B vitamins which are vital for your brain and nervous system. Alcohol can decrease the level of B vitamins in your body which can cause memory loss. If your doctor has given you thiamine and vitamin B complex, you should continue taking these and also eat foods rich in B vitamins. Examples are bread, rolls, cereals, potatoes, fruit, nuts and seeds.

Meat, fish, eggs, beans and pulses provide us with protein which is essential for the body's muscles, cells and tissues. Examples include fresh, canned or frozen oily fish such as salmon, mackerel, trout, sardines, herring or tuna. Having any of these 2-3 times a week will provide your body with Omega-3, an essential fatty acid needed for healthy brain function.

Milk and dairy are a good source of calcium, which helps to keep your bones healthy. Try to have 2-3 servings of milk and dairy each day for example, a glass of milk, carton of yogurt or piece of cheese.

Oils and spreads choose unsaturated oils and spreads and eat in small amounts.

Hydration try to drink 6-8 cups/glasses of fluid a day.

How can I find out more about healthy eating?

The Eatwell Guide suggests:

- get general advice from www.foodstandards.gov.scot/consumers/healthy-eating
- contact your local community dietitian, you can do this through your health centre or GP
- for more healthy eating ideas, handy tips and recipes visit Eat Better Feel Better at www.parentclub.scot/articles/eat-better-feel-better

You can find the Eatwell Guide at:

www.foodstandards.gov.scot/downloads/Eatwell_Guide_Booklet_-_new.pdf

Alcohol and your blood sugar

Drinking as little as two ounces of alcohol on an empty stomach can lead to very low blood sugar levels. When your blood sugar is low you may find that you crave sugary foods such as chocolate. This is your body's way of trying to increase blood sugar levels.

The rise in blood sugar from sweet foods doesn't last and causes more cravings, which can lead to weight gain. A healthier choice would be to have foods from the bread, cereals and potatoes group such as breakfast cereal or toast. These will provide 'slow-release' energy and give you essential nutrients.

What should I drink?

Drink as much fluid as you can and try to have healthy choices like water, milk, fruit juice, milk shakes, diluting juice, tea and coffee.

Try to eat as regularly as possible

Eating food (especially carbohydrates) before or with alcohol reduces the rate that the alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream.

If you have alcohol binges, try to get back to eating regular; healthy food as quickly as possible. Try to eat something every day. If you don't feel like a large meal, try a snack or a light meal instead.

Suggestions for light meals or snacks

- Cheese on toast or cheese and biscuits with fruit
- Beans on toast with tomato
- Toast with scrambled or boiled eggs with mushrooms and tomatoes
- Breakfast cereal with milk, banana or other fruit
- Sandwich or filled roll with salad and ham, cheese or egg
- Tin of soup and bread roll
- Nuts and dried fruit with glass of fruit juice
- Tinned fish on toast i.e. sardines or mackerel
- A roll with bacon and tomato
- Yogurt

Suggestions for easy main meals

Supermarkets have a wide variety of ready meals which can save time and energy. Try to include vegetables with all of your meals.

- Pasta with jar of sauce and grated cheese
- Fish fingers and oven chips
- Ham and eggs
- Steak pie and instant mashed potato
- Meatballs and tinned potatoes
- Macaroni cheese with tomatoes and ready-made salad

The benefits of eating regularly

Eating healthy food regularly will help your body to process nutrients properly, which will help you to feel better and keep your moods balanced. If you are drinking alcohol, it is important that you try to eat as well as you can. Eating well won't stop your body from being damaged by alcohol, but it can help to limit the damage.

Taking the next step

For support and further information available in Fife or Tayside please contact:

FASS Alcohol Support Service

Call us in confidence on

01592 206200

Access online help and support

www.fassaction.org.uk

f @FASSFife | t @FASSFife

Tayside Council on Alcohol

Call us in confidence on

01382 456012

Access online help and support

www.alcoholtayside.com

Other National information and support can be accessed through the following organisations:

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

Alcoholics Anonymous: Helpline: 0800 9177 650 | www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Drinkline (Advice and support): 0800 731 4314

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