

Should older people drink at all?

Our later years may bring many new and welcome friendships, interests and causes for celebration, but they may also bring unwanted changes: of familiar routines and structures to our days and people.

As our lives change, so too will the opportunities and reasons for 'having a drink'. The information in this leaflet will help you ensure that, if you drink alcohol, your drinking stays enjoyable and doesn't cause more harm than good.

How much is too much?

It's not just a matter of how much we drink. Even if we only drink a small amount, the situation in which we drink may lead to problems. It's also a question of why we drink. Here are some reasons why an older person might rely on alcohol to get by:

- Feeling lonely or depressed, due to retirement or death of a loved one.
- Feeling bored, perhaps due to retirement or loss of previous family responsibilities.
- Drinking heavily for many years already.
- Suffering pain or discomfort due to conditions such as arthritis.
- Having difficulty sleeping.
- Less able to get out and about, or fear of going out alone.
- Trying to keep warm or to reduce heating bills.

Do you recognise any of these in yourself? If so, you should definitely consider changing your drinking habits.

What are the risks for an older person?

- As we grow older the liver becomes more easily damaged by alcohol.
- Some older people suffer difficulties with their memory, balance and co-ordination. These can become worse when they drink alcohol. This can lead to hazards such as having a fall, leaving the gas on or forgetting to lock the door.
- As we get older, our bodies have a larger proportion of fat to water. This means that the effects of alcohol are increased because it is more concentrated in the body.
- The rate at which alcohol is broken down in the body is slowed; alcohol is circulated for longer so the effects last longer.
- Drink driving—this includes motorised mobility aids.
- Drinking alcohol actually leads to heat loss in the body, increasing the risk of hypothermia when a lot of alcohol is consumed.
- We may forget to eat properly or look after our health if we drink too much or too often. Drinking heavily plus not eating well can lead to permanent and severe memory loss.

- People who take medicines have to be particularly careful as alcohol can seriously interfere with their effects and significantly increase the risks to your health.

What can I do?

Many older people are unaware of the fact that there are recommended limits for drinking. Bear in mind that these are maximum amounts for fit and healthy individuals and older people should aim to drink less than that.

Try to change your daily routines to help you avoid drinking situations. It can be helpful to take part in activities which don't involve alcohol.

Here are some ideas:

- Spend more time with people who don't drink or drink very little. Meet friends or join a club of some sort.
- Take up a new hobby or interest.
- If you've been drinking to help you with one of the difficulties mentioned overleaf, speak to your doctor for advice on how to cope or call your local alcohol team for advice on 01803 604334.
- Try having a warm drink, rather than an alcoholic one, to help you sleep.
- Avoid alcohol if you're feeling ill or cold.
- If you do have a drink think about the time of day you're drinking.

If you do feel that you may have an alcohol-related problem, you should seek help. You are not alone. There is help out there in many forms. Other people are in the same position.

Sensible Limits

Men: No more than 3-4 units a day no more than 21 units in a week.

Women: No more than 2-3 units a day and no more than 14 units a week.

We all need at least 2 days a week without alcohol. Doctors agree that drinking more than the sensible limit damages health in the short and long term.

How many units in a drink?

1 pint standard lager/beer = 2.3 units

175 ml glass standard wine = 2.1 units

35 ml measure gin/rum/vodka/whiskey = 1.4 units

Where can I get help or advice?

You may feel embarrassed or uncomfortable asking for help with your drinking. However, the earlier you take action, the easier it will be to make positive changes. You could try:

- Talking to your doctor or another health or social care professional they are used to discussing these

issues and may be able to give useful advice and guidance.

- Contacting your local alcohol service on 01803 604334. We offer a range of services including advice, information, assessments, 1:1 workers, workshops, detoxification and signposting to local support services.
- Contacting the national alcohol helpline on 08009178282.

Falls

If you have experienced falls and are concerned that this may be related to your alcohol use or for any other reason then please contact 01803 219700.

This document can be made available in other languages and formats. For more information telephone 01803 604330.



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Alcohol and Older People



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Open – 9am - 5pm Mon- Fri

Right Care, Right Place, Right Time