

PATIENT INFORMATION

Alcohol and Pancreatitis

What is pancreatitis?

- Inflammation (swelling) of the pancreas (small organ, located behind your stomach, that helps with digestion.)

- Symptoms includes

- Aching pain often gets steadily worse and can travel along your back.
- Feeling or being sick (vomiting)
- Indigestion
- High temperature of 38C or more (Fever)
- Yellowing of the whites in your eyes or yellowing of your skin.
- Tenderness or swelling in your tummy
- Fast heartbeat (tachycardia) or rapid breathing.

One in four cases of acute pancreatitis are caused by alcohol

Binge drinking – drinking a lot of alcohol in a short period of time – is also thought to increase your risk of developing acute pancreatitis.

How does alcohol cause acute pancreatitis?

It is not understood exactly how alcohol causes acute pancreatitis. One theory is that alcohol molecules interfere with the cells of the pancreas, stopping them working properly.

- The more alcohol you drink, either regularly or during a binge session, the greater your risk of developing acute pancreatitis, often recurrently.
- Acute pancreatitis is reversible if you stop drinking alcohol. However, the pancreas may not always completely heal and some permanent damage may remain.
- Other causes for pancreatitis include gallstones and less commonly certain medications, infections, an imbalance in certain minerals or fats in the body, or damage to the pancreas, for example during surgery. Sometimes the cause is not identified.
- You are more likely to get pancreatitis if you are aged over 70, obese, have 2 or more alcoholic drinks a day, smoke, or have a family history of pancreatitis.

Diagnosed with Acute Pancreatitis, can I drink?

You should **stop drinking alcohol** completely and eat a low-fat diet to reduce your risk of another attack and of developing chronic pancreatitis.

Continuing to drink alcohol once you've recovered from acute pancreatitis can make a future episode more likely and more serious.

If you continue to drink the damage may continue and then lead to chronic pancreatitis which is a serious condition.

If you decide to continue drinking alcohol despite this increasing the further episodes of acute pancreatitis:

- You must avoid it for at least 6 months to allow your pancreas to recover, even if not alcohol related.
- Aim for as little as possible, no more than 14 units of alcohol a week, spread across 3 days or more and aim for at least 3 days alcohol free

If you have been diagnosed with Chronic Pancreatitis **you must stop drinking alcohol completely**

(including alcohol free drinks as these can contain up to 0.5% ABV (alcohol by volume)).

Diagnosed with Chronic Pancreatitis, can I drink alcohol?

At this stage your pancreas is permanently damaged from inflammation and unable to work properly. Any alcohol can make the condition worse, causing more damage to your pancreas.

Some people with chronic pancreatitis will develop diabetes, osteoporosis and can increase the risk of developing pancreatic cancer (Although this remains unlikely.)

Heavy drinking is the single most important risk factor for chronic pancreatitis, responsible for between 70–80% of cases in western Europe.

How can I prevent pancreatitis?

- Eating a healthy low-fat diet and losing weight will help to prevent gallstones and reduce your risk of pancreatitis.
- If you have been diagnosed with Chronic Pancreatitis **you must stop drinking alcohol completely and with acute pancreatitis you are highly recommended to stop drinking to reduce the risk of further episodes.**
- You are advised not to smoke. You can access support with stopping smoking from the Smokefree National Helpline on 0300 123 1044 or via your GP.