

**you don't have
to be drunk
to be doing
real
damage**



**Health
Promotion
Agency**



**many people in
Northern Ireland
drink without
experiencing
problems**

**But often drinkers
pack their drinking
into a few sessions -
usually on a Friday or
Saturday night - and
are not aware of the
damage this is doing
to their health.**



**Pint of lager/cider/stout
= 2 units**



**NI pub measure
of spirits/shot
= 1½ units**



**Alcopop/bottle of lager
= 1½ units**



**Bottle of wine
(6 small glasses)
= 9 units**



**Can of extra strong lager
= 4½ units**



**Small pub bottle of
wine (187.5ml)
= 2¼ units**

These are a general guide only - extra strong varieties could contain up to twice as many units.

how much is too much?

Alcohol is measured in units. Some alcoholic drinks will have the units marked on the label. A rough guide to the number of units in common alcoholic drinks is shown opposite.

To protect their health, men should not drink more than 4 units in any one day, and women not more than 3 units.* Over the course of a week, men should not drink more than 21 units and women not more than 14 units. It's important to spread these units throughout the week – you can't "save up" your units for the weekend or a party.

The health risks increase for each unit you drink over the daily limits, but binge drinking carries particular risks.

*These guidelines are for adult drinkers – they do not apply to under 18s, people on medication, pregnant women or older people who should seek further advice from their GP.

What is binge drinking?

You may think of binge drinking as drinking continually for a couple of days or more, or drinking till you fall over. In fact, many of us in Northern Ireland binge drink regularly at weekends.

Binge drinking is defined as drinking at least 10 units of alcohol in one session for men (eg five pints of lager) and at least 7 units for women (eg three small glasses of wine and a couple of vodkas). Research has shown that drinking this much in one session can damage your health, even if you still drink less than 21 or 14 units in total during the week.

what harm can binge drinking cause?

As well as the recognised immediate effects associated with drinking too much, like nausea/vomiting and a 'hangover', there are other more serious consequences of bingeing.

Short-term effects

In the short term, binge drinking increases your risk of:

- **becoming a victim of crime**, eg rape, domestic violence, mugging or assault;
- **accidents**, eg a road accident, fall or accidental fire;
- **anxiety**, which could lead to insomnia, depression or attempted suicide;
- **antisocial or criminal behaviour**, eg fights, domestic violence, vandalism or theft;
- **heart attack** – research shows this is more likely the day after binge drinking;
- **alcohol poisoning**, which can occur after excessive drinking and in some cases could result in coma or death;
- **sexually transmitted infections**, eg chlamydia, HIV;
- **unplanned pregnancy**.



Long-term effects

Over time, binge drinking can cause:

- **brain damage** – there is a risk to brain development, especially for young people, and increasing memory loss later in adulthood;
- **damage to the liver, heart, brain, pancreas** and, especially with spirits, the stomach;
- **cancer** – alcohol causes some types of cancer, eg mouth and throat, and increases the risk of others, eg breast, liver and stomach;
- **higher blood pressure**, which increases the risk of stroke;
- **depression** and increased risk of suicide;
- **family problems**, eg child neglect, family disputes, domestic violence and financial difficulties;
- **problems at work** or job loss;
- **alcohol dependence** or alcoholism;
- **weight gain** – a pint of average strength lager contains around 200 calories and a small glass of wine (125ml) 80-100 calories;
- **reduced resistance** to infection;
- **lowered libido** (sex drive).



how can I control my drinking?

- **Eat** before or while drinking, and avoid salty snacks, which make you thirsty.
- **Be assertive** – don't be pressured into drinking more than you want or intend to.
- **Know your limits** and stick to them.
- **Stay busy** – don't just sit and drink. Dance or have a game of pool if you're at a pub.
- **Don't confuse large measures of alcohol with standard measures**, eg a glass of wine served at a party or at home may be much larger than the standard 125ml.
- **Keep track** of your drinks and don't let people top up your drink until it's finished.
- **Try alternating alcoholic drinks with water** or other non-alcoholic drinks. Add plenty of mixer to your drinks to make them last longer.
- **Avoid rounds, 'shouts' and kitties** – drink to your own pace, not someone else's.
- **Drink slowly** – take sips not gulps.

drinking myths

Alcohol is good for the heart

Research shows that moderate drinking (1–2 units of alcohol a day) may reduce the risk of developing heart disease only for men over 40 or women who've been through the menopause. There is NO evidence that non-drinkers should start drinking alcohol.

Alcohol cheers me up and helps me forget my problems

Drinking too much tends to make you focus on your problems rather than forget them. Alcohol is a depressant and in the long run could make it more difficult for you to cope with any problems you already have. Drinking too much could also lead to new ones, such as illness, an accident or financial difficulties.

Beer will make me less drunk than spirits

One unit of beer or spirits contains the same amount of alcohol (the effects of different types of drinks may affect people's moods differently).

Drinking coffee will sober me up

Drinking coffee will make you a 'wide awake' drunk. Caffeine in coffee is a stimulant, so you might feel more alert, but it does not make you sober.

I'll be fine in the morning

It takes approximately one hour for your liver to process (metabolise) one unit of alcohol. Sleep will not affect this and you will not necessarily be sober in the morning. This depends on the number of units you have drunk the night before. You can still be over the legal drink-driving limit the next morning.



I'll be OK if I drink plenty of water before I go to bed

This may reduce the symptoms of a hangover by preventing dehydration, but won't make you any less drunk or protect you from the damaging effects of alcohol.

Alcohol-related problems are mostly caused by 'alcoholics'

Immediate problems like motor accidents, violent assaults and accidental injury are mostly caused by moderate drinkers who occasionally overdo it.

Further help and advice

If you're concerned about your drinking, speak to your GP or for further information on alcohol services visit:

www.drugsalcohol.info/contacts



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