

[Information Sheet - Institute of Welfare](#)

Alcohol and its Misuse

Alcohol is often the first 'drug' that people take. Although alcohol is a 'legal' drug, if misused, it can lead people to act irrationally. Alcohol-related violence is a big social problem. Drink-driving still kills and claims thousands of lives each year.

What happens in the body when you drink alcohol?

Absorption: about 20 percent of the alcohol in a drink is absorbed in the stomach and about 80 percent is absorbed in the small intestine.

- the greater the concentration of alcohol, the faster the absorption
- carbonated drinks tend to speed up the absorption of alcohol
- food slows down alcohol absorption.

The alcohol enters the bloodstream and dissolves in the water in the blood which carries it to the body tissues at which point it begins to take effect. Alcohol acts primarily on the nerve cells within the brain.

Blood alcohol levels: the observed effects depend directly on the blood alcohol level which is related to the amount of alcohol consumed. The level can rise significantly within 20 minutes after having a drink. The level increases when the body absorbs alcohol faster than it can eliminate it. So, because the body can only eliminate about one dose of alcohol per hour, drinking several drinks in an hour will increase your level much more than having one drink over a period of an hour or more.

Elimination: alcohol can leave the body via the kidneys (urinating) or via the lungs (through exhalation), which can be detected by a breathalyser. The remaining alcohol is broken down in the liver in a chemical process involving enzymes.

As a rule of thumb, it would take approximately one hour to eliminate the alcohol from a 12 oz (355 ml) can of beer.

What is sensible drinking?

The Department of Health advises men should not drink more than three to four units of alcohol per day and women no more than two to three units a day.

- One unit of alcohol = 10 ml of pure alcohol
- A pint of ordinary beer or lager = two units
- A glass of red wine = two units
- A single pub measure of spirits such as gin or whisky = one unit

Problems with alcohol

Many of these problems are caused by having too much to drink at the wrong place or time. They include: fights, arguments, money troubles, family upsets, spur-of-the-moment casual sex. Alcohol can make you do things you would not normally do. Drinking alcohol can help cause accidents at home, on the roads, in the water and on playing fields.

Problems with alcohol - physical health

Being very drunk can lead to severe hangovers, stomach pains (this is called gastritis), vomiting blood, unconsciousness and even death. Drinking too much over a long period of time can cause liver disease and increases the risk of some kinds of cancer. But there is good news for men over 40 and women of menopausal age - for them very moderate drinking may reduce the risk of heart disease.

Problems with alcohol - mental health

Although we tend to think of alcohol as something we use to make us feel good, heavy drinking can make you badly depressed. Many of the people who commit suicide have drinking problems. Alcohol can stop your memory from working properly and in extreme cases cause brain damage. In some people alcohol can cause them to hear imaginary voices. This is usually a very unpleasant experience and can be hard to get rid of.

Alcohol effects: men and women

Men tend to have more muscle and less fat than women. Because muscle tissue has more water than fat tissue, a given dose or amount of alcohol will be more diluted in a man than in a woman. Therefore, the blood alcohol level resulting from that dose will be higher in a woman than in a man, and the woman will feel the effects of that dose of alcohol faster than a man.

Seeking help

Characteristics of someone who has a problem may include:

- needing a drink every day
- drinking alone
- needing a drink to stop trembling
- drinking first thing in the morning
- a strong compulsion to drink
- spending a lot of time on activities involving alcohol
- not being able to stop drinking once you have started.

Any one of these symptoms can be an indicator of problematic drinking. Although alcohol misuse is a widespread problem for many people an individual may feel ashamed to admit they have a problem. But seeking help is the first stage on the road to addressing that problem. Treatment services are here to

help not to judge. Seek advice from your GP as to which services in your area can help you.

Dependency on alcohol and treatment

Treatment for alcohol dependency may require the management of withdrawal symptoms through a detoxification programme and a range of subsequent support.

Withdrawal symptoms can range from feeling nauseous, trembling, to heightened anxiety and a fever depending on the individual's physical condition and drinking history. All these symptoms can be managed, and most people who enter treatment will find symptoms disappear after a period of approximately two to four days.

Sources of help and further information

www.channel4.com/life/microsites/H/helplines/phone_g_dependency.html

www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

www.howsyourdrink.org.uk/home.php

www.turning-point.co.uk

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