



*drink less

Safe drinking guidelines & binge drinking

The UK Department of Health's current advice on sensible drinking is:

- Men – up to 3-4 units per day, or 21 units a week
- Women – up to 2-3 units per day, or 14 units a week



Whether you track your drinking by units per day or units per week the current advice also states that, in addition, you should also have two days a week free of alcohol.

The limits are lower for women because women's bodies have a higher fat to water ratio making them less able to dilute alcohol in the body and to process alcohol as effectively.

What is a unit?

Units were created in the 1970's and were therefore based on the popular and available drinks of the time, that's why 1 unit is equivalent to:

- A small glass (125ml) of 9% ABV wine
- Half a pint of 3.5% ABV bitter or lager
- A single measure (25ml) of 38%-40% ABV spirits

ABV stands for 'alcohol by volume', it's a measure of the alcoholic content in drinks expressed as a percentage of the whole drink. All alcoholic drink containers carry the ABV value on their labels, so a bottle of wine that says '13 ABV' or '13%' on its label contains 13% pure alcohol.

The problem today

Most of us think of units in terms of the size of the drink, for example, a glass of wine or a shot of spirits is one unit and a pint of beer or lager is two units. But a unit is based not just on size but also on the alcoholic strength of the drink.

Today, we have much stronger wines and beers/lagers and we are served with larger glasses of wines and bigger shots:

- A lot of lagers or ciders are now 5% ABV, which is 2.8 units per pint.
- The average pub wine is now 12% ABV and is served in a medium glass size (175ml) which is 2.1 units or a large glass size (250ml) which is 3 units.
- Measures of spirits are often sold in 35ml shots (rather than 25ml shot) which are 1.5 units.

What is the impact?

Mintel, the market researchers, have found that the amount of pure 100% alcohol consumed by British drinkers has increased by 10% since the year 2000, even though the actual volume of alcohol consumed has remained static throughout this period. So people are drinking the same amount but the strength of what they're drinking is increasing.



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Safe drinking guidelines & binge drinking contd

It may be that most of us are not aware of ABV and don't even notice. So although we are all getting more concerned about leading healthier lifestyles, by stealth we are actually drinking more alcohol!

Beer/lager /cider	Bottle (330ml)	Can (440ml)	Pint
5% ABV	1.7 units	2.2 units	2.8 units
Wine	Small glass	Medium glass	Large glass
13% ABV	1.6 units	2.3 units	3.3 units

What is binge drinking?

Binge drinking is classified as drinking more than double the daily allowance:

- Men – 8 or more units in one day
- Women – 6 or more units in one day

Because a unit is based not just on the size of the drink but also its strength, many of us may not be aware that we may be binge drinking more often than we care to think.

Assuming you're drinking either a 5% beer/lager/cider; or a 13% wine, then:

	You are binge drinking if you drink...
Men	3 pints or more; or 3.5 medium sized glasses of wine
Women	2 pints or more; or 2.5 medium sized glasses of wine

This level of drinking is classified as a 'heavy session' after which you should take a break from drinking alcohol for 48 hours to let your body recover.

Regular v binge drinking

As far as the long term health risks are concerned, regular drinking is no better than binge drinking - it is the overall alcohol intake that counts. If you do have a drink on most days then you may be storing up trouble for yourself.

Drink-free days

- Try not to drink alcohol every day: if you are a moderately heavy drinker give yourself a rest for at least two to three days a week.
- If you try to cut out alcohol from Monday to Thursday and find it difficult then you probably have a degree of alcohol dependency, and this in itself is something that you should be thinking about.

Pregnant women

If you are pregnant or trying to get pregnant then think carefully about whether you should be drinking alcohol.

Top tips for alcohol reduction

- Alternate an alcoholic drink with a non-alcoholic one
- Have two alcohol free days a week
- Find other ways to relax when you are stressed
- Avoid drinking on an empty stomach, the presence of food in the stomach will help delay the absorption of alcohol into the blood and stop you getting drunk very quickly
- Sip your drink slowly so it lasts
- Don't top up your glass before you have finished a drink so you can keep an eye on exactly how much you are drinking