

- Drinking of alcoholic beverages

LIMIT ALCOHOL TO IMPROVE HEALTH

My Weekly's favourite GP Dr Sarah Jarvis from TV and radio writes for you

My Weekly · 20 Mar 2021 · 52

The early days of the Covid-19 pandemic saw alcohol sales from shops increase by more than a third. Some of this increase was offset by the closure of pubs and restaurants, but many of my patients report drinking more than they did a year ago. How do you know if you're drinking too much and what should you do if you think you, or someone you love, has become too attached to alcohol?



The guidelines for safer drinking have changed several times over the years, so it's worth starting with what doctors recommend. Both men and women should avoid drinking more than 14 units a week, spread over several days. Pregnant women should try to avoid alcohol completely.

If you, like so many, have found your drinking creeping up, it's worth reminding yourself of some of the many benefits of cutting down. For instance, while alcohol may help you drop off at night, you'll sleepless well and won't feel as refreshed when you wake, often early. Cutting down on alcohol means a better night's sleep, with better concentration and improved mood the next day. Less alcohol means more energy, brighter skin and a slimmer waistline (alcohol is surprisingly high in calories). Your bank balance will thank you for it and so will your long-term health.

To know whether you should cut down, the first step is to keep track of your alcohol units. Using a home alcohol measure is helpful – it's very easy to underestimate how many units are in a glass of wine or a unit of spirits. For instance, many people assume that a glass of wine is a single unit. In fact, lots of large wine glasses hold 250ml or even more – that's over 3 units!

The Drinkaware unit calculator has lots of examples of different brands of drink and how much they contain. Using this can be a practical way to keep an accurate tally. Don't forget, there's no point in cheating – you're only kidding yourself. Keep a strict tally of your alcohol intake for at least a couple of weeks to get an idea of your average intake.

If you've made the decision to cut down, there are lots of tips that can help:

Use smaller glasses – for instance, normal strength beer has about 2 units in a pint, so a half pint glass would contain

STICKING TO 14 UNITS A WEEK WILL CUT YOUR RISK OF SEVERAL CANCERS AS WELL AS LIVER PROBLEMS one unit. Likewise, a 125ml wine glass is about 1½ units.

Have some drink free days and you're more likely to stick to a maximum of 14 units a week. It's often easier if everyone you live with does the same – you could work out together what activities you could do at home that don't include drinking alcohol.

Find non-alcoholic alternatives – you can afford to splash out with the money you'll save on alcohol, perhaps on the ingredients for alcoholfree “mocktails”. You could decorate them with fruit, straws or a paper umbrella to make them feel more special. There are lots of low alcohol or alcohol-free beers and wines available, too. If you tried them a few years ago and thought they tasted horrible, give them another go – they've come a long way!

Limit the times you drink alcohol – say, only drink with your evening meal or don't have a drink until after 7pm. Often drinking alcohol is a habit – by changing your routine, you can break the habit within a few weeks, although you'll need a bit of willpower while you do it.

If you're worried about a loved one's drinking, remember that only they can make the decision to change. Try to be positive, rather than confronting them about it. Sit down at a time when there are no interruptions (and no alcohol) and explain that you're concerned because you care about them. Offer to support them and go with them to see the GP – your first port of call if you think there's a problem.

NEXT WEEK: Has your hay fever started early?