

Do I Have a Drink Problem?

Information on
Alcohol, Cutting down & Stopping



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Introduction

YAAS is a free and confidential service offering advice and support to those affected by their own or others alcohol use.

We are a small non-statutory charitable organisation based in York. The service is warm and friendly, and clients feel safe to discuss problems they are facing in a non-judgemental atmosphere.

YAAS works closely with other social care agencies across York to ensure a holistic approach to supporting clients. We understand that often alcohol is only a part of the difficulties individuals face.

The problem drinker

- Drinks increasing amounts of alcohol to achieve the same effect – and their drinking habits alter to accommodate this;
- Drinks faster than other people, and needs to take a drink at regular times – every day;
- Conceals the amount they drink, and makes promises about their drinking that are not kept;
- Spends more than they should on alcohol, and continues to do so;
- Uses anything as an excuse for a drink – good or bad.
- Needs a drink before socializing, even if they know that they will be drinking later on;
- Dislikes attending social occasions that aren't likely to provide a "sufficient" quantity of drink;
- Reaches for a drink to take the edge off stress, anxiety, shyness or disappointment;
- Has 'lost' hours of their life through drinking – and has also suffered loss of memory or "blackout."

Day	Time	Where	Who With	What you Drank	No. of Drinks	Total Units	Cost	How you felt before drinking	Consequences
This weeks Unit and Cost totals									

Problematic drinking

If TWO or more of the following apply to you then your drinking is becoming a problem for you and for those around you:

- Thinking a lot about the “next” drink.
- Preferring lone drinking to social drinking.
- Sweating in the morning or during the night.
- Waking up with the shakes.
- Drinking and driving.
- Needing to drink at regular times every day.
- Other people telling you they are concerned about your drinking.
- Becoming annoyed when other people comment on your drinking or your behaviour when you are drinking.
- Hiding the evidence of your drinking—hiding empty bottles and cans, chewing mints to hide the smell of alcohol on your breath.
- Lying about your drinking.
- Spending more than you can afford on alcohol and getting into financial difficulty as a result.
- Using anything as an excuse to drink—good or bad.
- Starting to drink earlier in the day.

If you do not address your drinking behaviour it is likely to get worse.

Day	Time	Where	Who With	What you Drank	No. of Drinks	Total Units	Cost	How you felt before drinking	Consequences
This weeks Unit and Cost totals									

Serious drinking problem

If ANY of the following apply to you, we strongly urge you to seek help:

- Usually drinking alone;
- Always waking with the shakes and feeling sweaty;
- Needing a drink to start the day;
- Being drunk for several days at a time;
- Regular “blackouts” - you “lose” several hours of your life;
- Drinking large quantities over the course of the day without it making you drunk;
- Frequent drinking and driving;
- Drinking and driving even when you promised yourself not to;
- Using or threatening violence;
- Being arrested for drunken behaviour;
- Admission to hospital as a result of drinking;
- Losing your job / home / partner directly because of your drinking;
- Feeling that there is no escape from your problems.

There is a way out of this kind of drinking but you will need support. York Alcohol Advice Service can help.

Giving up on alcohol means entering into a completely new world, a world parallel with the drinking one, but utterly different. To survive as a non-drinker in a drinking world you have to learn to say no and keep on saying no. Drink isn't a passport to success and happiness; these come when you stop drinking. In just a couple of months after giving up, you can change from an overweight, slobby, depressed drinker to a fit, slim, healthy looking person. The change doesn't take place overnight, but with every day things do get better and the transformation is wonderful.

Taken from “How to say no to alcohol” by Keith McNeill

Other sources of help

Alcoholics Anonymous

AA Head office 01904 644026
AA Helpline (York area) 01132 454 567

Al-Anon

Al-Anon is a support group for people affected by someone else's drinking.

- Wednesdays, 7pm
- Friends Meeting House, Friargate, York.

Drinkline

0800 917 8282
• Monday – Friday 9am – 11pm
• Saturday/Sunday 6pm – 11pm

NHS Direct 24hour

0845 46 47

You'll feel better without it

The first day is the worst. It hits you like a cold shower, like a bereavement, an old friend who isn't there anymore and isn't going to be ever again. Taking it in sends a cold shiver down the spine and a feeling of panic sets in. (The old friend is really a bitter enemy but in those first five minutes it doesn't feel like it).

After one week of not drinking, the change is already noticeable. Your head clears, your body begins to ache less and the mind becomes clearer and sharper. After a couple of weeks, your sense of smell and taste returns and food is a lot more enjoyable. That aching tiredness starts to disappear fast and it is easier to get up in the morning.

Though it is easier to get up, at first it is harder to sleep at night. This is because for years the alcohol has been used as a sleeping pill and when it's no longer there the body finds it hard to cope. You lie awake for what seems like hours before you doze off. Luckily this doesn't last long. The insomnia takes about a week to ten days to get over, and when that happens sleep is beautiful. It is so much more relaxing, more restful and peaceful, like sleep you enjoyed as a child.

Waking up alcohol free is a marvellous sensation. Drink is a drug and taking a drug for years and years can't be good for us. It takes about a month for the full physical horrors of hangovers to be purged from the system. It is a gradual process and every day it gets better and better, so don't be put off at the start, there are no miracles, just stick with it and you will find a new person breaking through. It really is worth it.

The problem is time, and what to do with it. Time bringing with it boredom – aching, numbing, soul-destroying boredom – at first. Why? Because you forget what you used to do with yourself before you started drinking. And now there's a great hole in your life where drink used to be.

Should I change my drinking patterns?

Try making balance sheet showing the positive and negative aspects of your drinking:

The good things	The Bad Things
I enjoy the taste	It's costing too much
It's how I meet friends	It's upsetting the family
It helps me relax	It's affecting my work
I get on better with people	Sex isn't so good
I feel less shy	I worry about my health



There may well be many good points about your drinking (you wouldn't drink at all if there weren't any good points to drinking). However if the positive aspects of drinking are outweighed by the negative consequences of drinking, then it is only logical that you should change your drinking patterns.

“But is drinking the real problem?”

“Drink isn't my problem, it's the answer to my problems”. If a person has begun to drink in an attempt to solve a problem it can be very hard for him or her to see that alcohol has become a problem in itself. Though alcohol may seem a stimulant, it achieves this effect by releasing inhibitions.

Although alcohol dulls mental as well as physical pain, it does this by depressing the nervous system, - and mental depression makes pain worse. These are some of the reasons why drinking to solve mental distress can actually worsen it.

“Or is the real problem my job/partner/family...?”

Of course, there may be difficulties with colleagues, husband and wife, parents. Alcohol, or the friendlier atmosphere of the pub, can provide a welcome escape but is seldom the answer. Perhaps your partner/parent/ employer is not going to change anyway. Putting the blame on them is not going to improve anything.

“And who says so?”

Most of us get irritated if someone makes critical comments about our habits or lifestyle. It is worse if we feel guilty or ashamed already. An angry retort from us may make the critic conveniently back off.

Sometimes, however, we need others to help us see things the way they really are. Most of us can shut out from our mind things we did that we would rather forget. Our memory of what happened on drinking days is particularly liable to be patchy.

“I’m at my best when I’m drinking”

Occasionally people say “I am someone who needs it – I’m at my best when I’ve had a few. Look at the poets, painters, composers who were drinking; look at Winston Churchill”.

That may be. But if you have a problem in *your life*, concentrate on *that*, not the next person. It’s not very creative to make yourself ill through drinking.

“I’ll lose my only pleasure in life”

It’s a matter of weighing up the advantages against the disadvantages of your drinking. Life without your style of drinking **IS** possible. Lots of people have gone along the path you are now contemplating.

“Should I just cut down, or stop altogether?”

Some problem drinkers decide to continue to drink and manage to avoid further problems. They make a radical change, not only reducing what they drink on any one occasion (e.g. never more than two or three drinks), but also cut back on how often they drink (e.g. never more than two or three times per week). By all means try reducing rather than stopping. If this does not work, be honest and avoid looking for excuses. In our experience, and according to research findings, abstinence is essential if any of the following apply to you:

improve in a few days, or maybe a week or so;

- Try to get as much rest as possible;
- Try to relax as much as you can. Take a bath or shower and pamper yourself;
- Buy in some of your favourite foods. You will probably find it best to eat a little but often as your appetite gets back to normal. Plain nutritious food will also provide the extra energy you need at the moment;
- Feeling anxious, irritable or a bit confused during the first week can be another sign of withdrawal from alcohol. Some of this will pass, but it is important to begin to find alternatives to alcohol as a way of coping with uncomfortable feelings and difficult situations.

If you experience severe discomfort – consult your GP

Looking after yourself when you stop

Whilst you were drinking, you may have been eating poorly, not getting enough rest or missing out on other ways of enjoying yourself.

Alcohol is a depressant drug and slows down the action of the body and brain, affecting your behaviour, control over your arms and legs and your power to judge things. Naturally, when you stop drinking, your body may have some reaction. Not everyone experiences withdrawal symptoms from alcohol. If you do, remember that this is a healthy sign – your body is getting back to normal and any discomfort should pass in a few days.

You may experience some of the following:

- Sleeplessness;
- Stomach upset;
- Perspiration;
- Shakiness;
- Dehydration;
- Irritability;
- Panic or confusion.

What to do

You may find some of these tips useful for coping in the first few days.

- Really look after yourself – perhaps make plans to stay at home for a few days;
- Drink lots of sweet drinks – hot or cold. This will help if you are dehydrated;
- Tell someone close to you about your decision to cut down or stop drinking. Having close support and encouragement will help you to achieve your aims;
- Try not to get anxious if you are not sleeping well. Sometimes, if you are restless the best thing to do is to get up, walk around, make a hot drink. Perhaps reading or listening to some music will help. Your sleep will probably

- If you have had symptoms of dependence for several months or more;
- If your husband or wife is not in agreement with your plans for limited drinking (i.e. if any drinking sets up tension);
- If you tend to be someone who is easily upset, or does things very much on the spur of the moment;
- If you are not good at making rules for yourself: with abstinence there is one simple rule for every occasion – no alcohol – and that is easy for your family and friends to understand too;
- If you have damaged any of the body's organs (such as liver) through drinking.

Stop? How long for?

Some people decide to stop forever, others stop for a while and recommence limited drinking once the stresses and strains of the problem have diminished, the brain has cleared and constructive thinking is again possible. Drinking again is safer if the new pattern is totally different from the old pattern (i.e. when, where, and with whom). But why not cross this bridge when you come to it? Leave it to next year to worry about whether to drink next year. Take a day at a time. The important thing is that you have decided to do something about it now.

I see all this, but it doesn't apply to me

Of course, perhaps none of this applies to you. But because none of us likes to make a critical examination of ourselves, just give this leaflet a moment's reflection for two reasons:

- To be sure you are seeing yourself as others see you;
- To check whether your real objective is to do with fear of losing face. ("No-one is going to convince me I've got a drink problem").

Physical effects of heavy drinking



Alcohol, whether in the form of beer, lager, wine or spirits, is a drug and as such causes physical damage to the body.

Short-term damage is caused by “congeners” (colourings and taste-producing chemicals) in our drinks. The more congeners there are in a drink, the more likely you are to have a hangover. Clear or pale drinks (e.g. vodka, gin, white wine) contain very few, whilst darker coloured drinks (rum, sherry, brandy, red wine) contain more. The throbbing head and “groggy” feeling of a hangover is made worse by the alcohol content of the drink.

Alcohol has a “diuretic” action (increases the flow of urine), which produces a state of dehydration, and hence the awful thirst. There is no real cure for a hangover, but its effects are not long lasting.

However, alcohol can cause long-term medical damage to almost every tissue and organ in the body.

Mouth and stomach

Excessive use of alcohol can have a corrosive effect on the digestive tract.

- Gastritis—Alcohol damages the stomach lining causing severe stomach pains.
- Reflux—Stomach acid moves up into the lower oesophagus (gullet) causing ulceration, tearing and bleeding.
- Ulcers — ulcers perforate the stomach wall, there can be a major loss of blood, which can be fatal.
- Malnutrition—The small intestine becomes inflamed and cannot absorb food and vitamins so well.



Tips for cutting down

Some things that others have found useful for cutting down include:

- Going out a bit later or just having your first drink later;
- Replacing some of your drinks with non-alcoholic or low-alcohol drinks;
- Switching your usual drink to one with less alcohol in it;
- Avoiding the quick drink situation – missing out the one at lunch time or after work can make a huge difference over the week;
- Having at least two alcohol free days – taking up a new interest, sport or just going to the cinema if you find most of your social life is involved around the pub;
- Drinking longer drinks – beer rather than spirits and drinking more slowly;
- If you drink at home, buying beers and wines with lower alcohol content could make a great difference;
- Decide a limit of no more than, say, 5 units on any one occasion;
- Buy smaller glasses for the home or buy a drinks measure.
- Keep a supply of non alcoholic alternatives for drinking at home and entertaining;
- Tell others you are cutting down and avoid rounds;
- Finding other ways or relaxing – exercise or relaxation techniques for example;
- If you anticipate a heavy evening, avoid drinking on an empty stomach and make sure someone else is driving.

How many units in your drink?		
Volume/ Measure	Beverage	Units
Pint	Standard lager/beer	2.3
Pint	Premium lager/beer	2.8
Bottle 330ml	Premium lager/beer	1.7
Can 440ml	Super-strength lager	4
Pint	Regular cider	2.8
Litre	Regular cider	5
Litre	Strong cider	8.5
175 ml	Wine/champagne	2.1
250 ml	Wine/champagne	3
Bottle 750 ml	Wine/champagne	9
Bottle 275 ml	Alcopop/ready to drink	1.5
25 ml	Spirits, e.g. vodka, whisky, gin, rum	1
35 ml	Spirits, e.g. vodka, whisky, gin, rum	1.4
50 ml	Port, Sherry, Martini	1

Heart

Heavy drinking is associated with a range of circulatory diseases and conditions, including:

- Raised blood pressure. Increases the risk of heart disease and stroke.
- Alcoholic cardiomyopathy. Fatty infiltration of the heart muscle. It can lead to heart attacks and premature death.



Pancreas

The Pancreas is a large gland behind the stomach which secretes enzymes and releases insulin. Regular binge drinking can lead to:

- Acute pancreatitis—Inflammation of the pancreas. Causes severe pain, which may persist even after a period of abstinence.
- Chronic pancreatitis—which may result in diabetes.

Liver

Alcohol is still quite concentrated by the time it reaches the liver. Continual and excessive drinking may result in the following stages of damage:

- Fatty liver -Deposits of fat in the liver. Total abstinence can reduce the liver to its normal size with no residual damage.
- Alcohol hepatitis. Inflammation of the liver. Full recovery is still possible.
- Cirrhosis -Dead scar tissue in the liver. This condition is not reversible, but the liver will continue to regenerate or grow new tissue, enlarging the liver.
- Liver failure—The liver is unable to produce new tissue. This condition is virtually untreatable and is often fatal.



Brain

Brain tissue is directly damaged by alcohol.

Long-term excessive consumption can lead to:

- Depression and anxiety;
- Mental health problems such as hallucinations, mood swings and paranoia;
- Alcohol dementia -A gradual breakdown in brain function;
- Poor concentration;
- Slower reflexes and memory problems.



Other risk factors

Smoking

The risks of getting cancer from smoking are significantly increased by alcohol.

Sex

Alcohol misuse affects the reproductive functions of men and women. Persistent heavy drinking can lead to:

Men

Shrinking of the testicles & penis

Diminished sperm production

Impotence

Loss of body hair

Women

Increased risk of infertility

Birth-related defects

Drink and Crime

The British Medical Association estimates that either the offender or victim has been drinking in 65% of homicides, 75% of stabbings, 70% of beatings and 50% of fights or domestic assaults.

Recommended drinking limits

It is recommended that men should drink no more than three to four units a day and women no more than two or three units a day.

The alcohol content of beers, lagers and wine vary quite a lot. Extra strength beers and lagers have sometimes more than double the alcohol content of an ordinary beer/lager and wine carries between 6 and 15% alcohol. Drinks poured at home are often much larger than those served in a pub or club.

Men consistently drinking four units a day and women consistently drinking three units a day incur a progressive health risk. The more you drink and the more often you drink above the benchmarks, the greater the risk that you are damaging your health.

These limits are daily benchmarks that you can use as a guide to how much you can drink without putting your health at risk. They do not apply to women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy or to young people who have not physically matured.

The benchmark applies to any day when you drink – whether that is most days, once or twice a week or occasionally. Most people drink different amounts on different occasions. But not drinking on some days does not mean that you can drink more than the benchmark on days when you do drink. It is about how much alcohol your body can cope with on one day without any risk to your health.

Having one or two alcohol free days is wise, as it helps prevent the habit of drinking every day, which could lead to problem drinking.

Drinking between 21 and 50 units a week for men and 14 and 35 units per week for women exposes you to increased risk of ill health and the problems arising from drinking.