



# ALCOHOL

## - how much are you really drinking?



Having a glass of wine is relaxing, sociable and can even benefit your health. But how much is too much and how do you know when your drinking is out of control? **Sarah Russell** finds out

**I**t's a familiar scenario. You've had a tough day at work, or with the kids and all you want to do is kick off your shoes and chill out. What better than a large glass of wine... or two? We all do it and to a certain extent there's little wrong with having a drink to wind down at the end of a hard day. It's an acceptable part of our modern lifestyle and alcohol can, in small amounts, even be beneficial to our health. The problem lies when one glass leads to two, three, or more on a regular basis, or when it becomes a habit out of control.

**One in five women drink too much**  
In Great Britain today, almost one in five women regularly drink more than the recommended amount of 14 units per week. One in 25 adults is actually dependent on alcohol and the UK has one of the highest binge drinking rates in Europe. And, somewhat more worryingly, alcohol is estimated to be responsible for 33,000 deaths in the UK each year.  
The Office for National Statistics, which carried out two studies of drinking habits in 2010,

also found that middle-aged women were much more likely to drink every day than younger people. The study found that professional, well-educated women over 35 were the biggest drinkers, downing a weekly average of 10.5 units. Drinking was also mainly done in the home, leading to higher consumption due to 'home measures'.  
**Take better care of yourself**  
If you're interested in fitness, the chances are you take better care

of your health than the rest of the less active population, and it's likely that you drink less too, if at all. But there is also a mindset among some of us that we can somehow 'sweat it off' and that we can get away with it because we're fit.  
In fact, according to the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) "alcohol abuse is as prevalent in the athletic

community as it is in the general population."  
**So what exactly does alcohol do to us?**  
The general consensus, despite all the 'a drink a day is good for you' headlines, is that alcohol has more detrimental effects than positive, no matter how much we'd like to believe the former. In the short-term and even at a very moderate level, alcohol is a diuretic and causes the body to dehydrate. It raises your core temperature, lowers your blood sugar levels and impairs reaction times, co-ordination and balance even after only one or two drinks. Not only that, alcohol disrupts your sleep patterns and reduces the REM cycles, making you feel exhausted the next day.

**Easy to over consume**  
And the trouble is, most of us grossly underestimate our alcohol intake. We may think we're only having one or two units, but it's deceptive. In my research for this article, I totted up the units in the two (what I considered to be) 'small' glasses of red wine I had with dinner. Once I'd measured exactly how much I'd had (175ml x two glasses at 13.5% red wine) using the calculator on [www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk), I was horrified to discover I'd downed nearly five units – far more than the recommended two-three units per day. And therein lies the problem: it's very easy to over-consume, >>>

A 175ml glass of white wine provides **140 kcals** the same number of calories as a slice of cake!

**What is a unit?**

**+** One unit is 10ml of pure alcohol – the amount of alcohol the average adult can process within an hour. But contrary to popular belief, one drink does not equal one unit. A small (125ml) glass of wine provides around 1.5 units and a pint of beer (at 5% volume) will provide almost three units. Most average glasses of wine in pubs and restaurants are actually 175ml, some are even 250ml, providing a whopping 3.35 units per glass. Watch out for the percentage strength of wine too, as typical measurements are given on 12% volume, which isn't the norm, while some are as strong as 15%.

**125 ml = 1.5 units**

**1 pt = 3 units**

**5% vol**

especially now wine is stronger and glasses are bigger. I would only need to drink like that three nights a week, and I'd be one of the 10 million Britons who regularly consume more than is recommended, risking a whole host of health problems. Quite an eye-opener.

According to the website [www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk), the long-term consequences of high alcohol consumption can be considerable. The risks of liver disease, pancreatitis, diabetes, cancer (especially throat and mouth), heart disease and depression are all increased by just moderate levels of drinking. Not only that, but high alcohol intake can also impair your body's absorption of nutrients from food and bring about vitamin deficiencies.

**And it's fattening!**

And that's not to mention the effect on your waistline. Alcohol offers no nutritional benefit whatsoever and provides 7kcal per gram, compared to carbohydrate at 4kcal and fat at 9kcal. A 175ml glass of white wine provides 140kcal – the same number of calories as a slice of cake! How about a pint of lager –

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surprised to hear it's the calorific equivalent of a burger?

In a 2009 Department of Health survey, it was revealed that the average wine drinker consumes 2,000 extra calories each month. Over the course of a year, that's the equivalent of eating 184 bags of crisps or 38 roast beef dinners.

It's not just the calories from alcohol that do the damage either. Along with drinking alcohol comes the temptation to eat fattening snacks – crisps and salted nuts in the pub and chip shop or takeaway fare on the way home.

According to the Department of Health survey, almost one in three people order crisps or nuts to accompany a drink in the pub, while nearly a fifth regularly opt for takeaway food.

More than one in three said they are likely to eat more than they usually would or ditch the healthy diet when they drink

Alcohol can tempt you into eating unhealthy snacks

above their recommended daily limits. And more than six out of 10 drinkers have a less healthy breakfast if they have a hangover.

**So how much is too much?**

Standard UK guidelines for women is to drink no more than 14 units per week, and it's also better to spread the units out throughout the week, so the advice is for women to consume two-three units per day with two days alcohol free. These guidelines sound quite reasonable until you start to accurately measure the units in your consumption (see 'What is a unit?' box). Use the [www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk) unit calculator and prepare to be surprised!

**Can you sweat it off?**

Some people swear by sweating off a hangover and there appears to be some anecdotal evidence that it seems to work. According

to new research from the Government, one in five people believe that sweating off a hangover is the most effective approach. But fitness expert and author, Christine Luff doesn't agree: "I wouldn't recommend exercising with a hangover at all," she says. "When you're feeling hungover, you're actually very dehydrated, which is never a good thing. You might be able to get through a short session, but it's dangerous to try to push through a long training session with a hangover because you could end up severely dehydrated. You're also likely to feel clumsy, which increases your risk of falling or injury."

If you've got some training planned and you've woken up feeling awful, then it's probably a good idea to ditch it

altogether. You're hardly going to get much benefit and you're likely to end up even more dehydrated. Try a short jog on the treadmill or a ride on the bike if you feel up to it and reschedule the tougher session when it'll be more productive.

**What about after exercise?**

If you've had a great session at the gym or got through a tough run, you might feel you've earned your glass of wine. But go easy. Make sure you refuel and hydrate with water or a sports drink properly first and leave a few hours before you have any alcohol, otherwise you risk undoing all your good work.

**Are there any real benefits?**

If you read some of the media headlines you could be forgiven

for thinking that heavy drinking is actually good for your health. Red wine may well possess antioxidants to help protect against heart disease, but what the headlines fail to mention is that the benefits are only gained by drinking one small glass per day – hardly a licence to polish off the bottle.

"The scientific evidence is clear," says June Davidson, Cardiac Nurse at the British Heart Foundation. "Drinking too much alcohol can cause high blood pressure, stroke, some cancers and damage your heart. While drinking in moderation has been shown to offer some health benefits, there are better ways – such as eating a sensible diet and exercising – to protect your heart health."

**In conclusion**

Despite all this doom and gloom, the reality is that most of us >>>

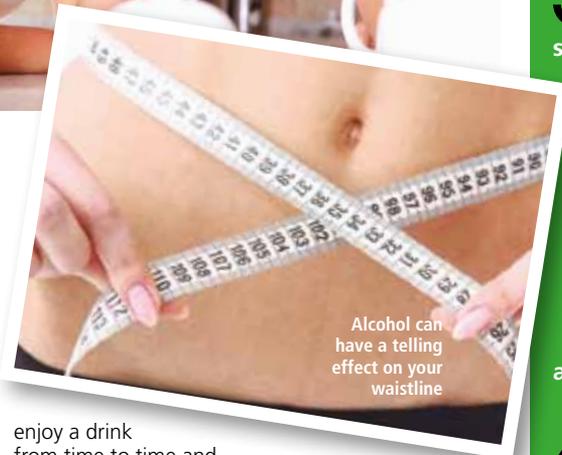
**Standard UK guidelines for women is to drink no more than 14 units per week**



It might be sociable but alcohol has its downside



Red wine has health benefits – but only if you limit it to one glass a day



Alcohol can have a telling effect on your waistline

enjoy a drink from time to time and there's no reason why we have to abstain from alcohol altogether. The bottom line is that, in moderation, drinking alcohol is enjoyable, sociable and shouldn't have to cause negative health issues. At the end of the day, it's all about awareness, knowledge and personal choice. Know the facts, stay within healthy limits and make your own decisions about how you incorporate alcohol into your life. Cheers! ■

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## Tips for healthier drinking

### Drinkaware.co.uk has this advice

- 1** Make your drinks go further by having bottles of beer or halves instead of pints and choosing a smaller glass for your wine. Buying spritzers or shandies will also help keep that unit count down.
- 2** Leave your cash card at home. If you go out drinking, set yourself a financial budget and stick to it. Once it's run out... go home.
- 3** Focus on the positive aspects of cutting down. Drinking less reduces the longer term risk of serious diseases, improves the condition of your skin and can have a positive effect on sleep patterns. Worth remembering next time you're at the bar.
- 4** Beware of rounds – they can be expensive and dangerous if it means keeping pace with the fastest drinker in your group. Stay in control and give rounds a miss.
- 5** Eat before you go drinking. A healthy meal before you go out, and snacks between drinks can help to slow down the absorption of alcohol and keep you in control.
- 6** Measure home drinking. Buy a small (125ml) wine glass for the home and measure your intake. You'll be surprised!
- 7** Alternate drinks. Sip a soft drink or water between alcoholic drinks. It slows you down and helps prevent dehydration.
- 8** Take the right approach. Cut down gradually rather than go cold turkey – you're more likely to stick to it.
- 9** Stress less. Try not to make alcohol key to your after work wind down, and try some alternative stress-busters like hitting the gym or running a bath.
- 10** Ask for support. Tell friends and family that you're trying to cut down, and ask for their help.

◆ For expert advice and a 'unit calculator' visit [www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk)  
Get the free iPhone drinks tracker at [www.nhs.uk/Livewell/alcohol](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/alcohol)

◆ If you have concerns that you are drinking more than you should, contact your GP for advice and visit [www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk).