

## **Diabetes and Drinking Alcohol Safely** (page 1 of 4)



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You are entitled to a copy of any letter we write about you. Please ask if you want one when you come to the hospital.

If you are unhappy with the advice you have been given by your GP, consultant, or another healthcare professional, you may ask for a second (or further) opinion.

The evidence used in the preparation of this leaflet is available on request. Please email: [patient.information@salisbury.nhs.uk](mailto:patient.information@salisbury.nhs.uk) if you would like a reference list.

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Just because you have diabetes, does not mean that you can't drink alcohol; however, it is important to know about the effects that it can have on your body's health and your diabetes, and how to drink sensibly to reduce these risks.

Alcoholic drinks contain variable amounts of sugar and alcohol, so different alcoholic drinks will have different effects on your blood glucose levels. Some alcoholic drinks contain little or no carbohydrate (such as dry wines and spirits), so will cause your blood glucose to drop, some contain variable amounts of carbohydrate (such as beer, lager cider, alco-pops, sherry, sweet wines and port) and will initially raise your blood glucose, but later on, your blood glucose may fall and increase your risk of hypoglycaemia (low blood glucose).

### **Other health risks of drinking too much alcohol**

Alcohol is very high in calories, and can cause weight gain if you drink too much. Other health risks of drinking too much alcohol are high blood pressure, inflammation and damage to the liver (alcoholic liver disease) inflammation of the pancreas (pancreatitis), brain damage, reduced fertility, heart attack, stroke, accidents and injuries associated with drinking too much. The risk of developing cancers of the mouth, throat and breast also increases with any amount that you drink on a regular basis. Never drink and drive – even small amounts of alcohol can affect your ability to drive safely.

### **Alcohol and hypoglycaemia**

Alcohol can cause your blood glucose to drop for several hours after drinking, potentially reducing your blood glucose during the night, or even the next morning. This is because alcohol is processed by the liver, and excess alcohol in the bloodstream interferes with the normal process of glucose release from the liver when blood glucose levels fall. The effect of excess alcohol on blood glucose levels can last for many hours, whilst the liver is working to break down and get rid of the toxic effects of alcohol from your blood stream. On average, it takes about one hour for your body to break down one unit of alcohol, and the more you drink the longer it will take for the liver to get rid of the excess alcohol.

Heavy drinking increases the risk of having severe hypoglycaemia (low blood glucose), especially if you inject insulin and/or have to take sulphonylurea tablets for your diabetes, and can make emergency treatment for treating severe hypoglycaemia (such as glucagon injections) ineffective, if you lose consciousness. Severe hypoglycaemia can also easily be mistaken for

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drunkenness, which could result in delay in you getting appropriate medical treatment, if you need it.

Drinking too much alcohol can also affect your judgement and ability to manage your diabetes, so you may not realise when your blood glucose has dropped too low, so always be careful not to drink too much.

Check your blood glucose before and after drinking alcohol, and make sure that you have something to eat that contains some starchy carbohydrate (such as bread/toast, potato, rice, pasta, chips, pizza, bowl of cereal) before you start drinking, and after you have been drinking. This is to reduce your risk of having hypoglycaemia later on.

If you go out drinking, take some diabetes identification with you (such as an ID card, bracelet, necklace) and some glucose treatment (such as glucose tablets, Jelly Babies) in case you have hypoglycaemia and need to treat it. Tell your friends that you have diabetes, and what to do if they find you unconscious and you have been drinking.

Take into account any physical activity (such as sports, dancing, sex) along with drinking alcohol, which could further increase your risk of having hypoglycaemia.

## Sensible drinking

There is no safe amount of alcohol that men and women can drink. To reduce your health risks from drinking alcohol, it is recommended that men and women drink no more than 14 units a week, and if you drink this much, spread your drinking over three days or more. 14 units is equivalent to 6 pints of standard strength beer (3-4 % ABV) or 10 small glasses of low strength wine (11 % ABV). If you are pregnant, or are trying to conceive, then you should avoid alcohol altogether, as alcohol is very harmful to your unborn baby.

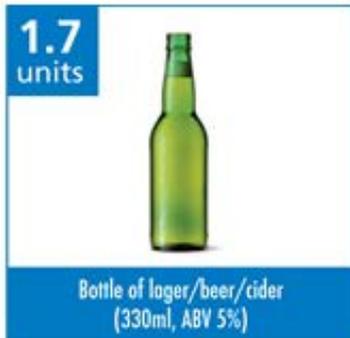
## What is a unit of alcohol?

Alcohol is measured in 'units'. The idea of counting alcohol units was first introduced in the UK in 1987 to help people keep track of their drinking. At this time the average strength beer, lager or ale was only 3.5 % ABV (or three percent alcohol by volume), and the average bottle of wine was less than 10 % ABV. ABV is a measure of the amount of pure alcohol as a percentage of the total volume of liquid in a drink.

Since then the alcoholic strength of many beers, lagers, ales, ciders and wines has increased. Also, with so many different drinks and different sized shots, glasses, bottles and can sizes, it's very easy to get confused about how many alcohol units are in your drink. For example:

- strong beers, bitters, lagers and vintage ciders (5-8% ABV) can contain twice the number of units than standard strength (3-4 % ABV) ones
- most wines sold in the UK these days contain a minimum of 12-14% ABV, so a 125 ml small glass of wine= 1.5 units, a 175 ml standard glass of wine = 2 units and a 250 ml large glass of wine = 3 units.

See the guide overleaf to find out how many alcohol units are in your favourite drink:



## Alcohol problems

Realising that you have a problem with alcohol is the first step to getting better, but it is often the hardest one. You may need help if:

- you always feel the need to have a drink
- you get into trouble because of your drinking
- other people warn you about how much you're drinking.

A good place to start is with your GP. Be honest with them about how much you drink. If your body has become dependent on booze, stopping drinking overnight can be life-threatening, so get advice about cutting down gradually. Your GP may refer you for one to one counselling, to your local community alcohol support group or a specialist alcohol advice service. Getting help and support is crucial to understanding and overcoming the issues that make you drink.

You may be prescribed medication to help with alcohol withdrawal symptoms. Alcohol withdrawal symptoms can range from not sleeping, agitation, anxiety, sweating and tremors, right through to vomiting, diarrhoea, hallucinations and seizures.

Most people receive support to stop drinking in the community. Some may need a short stay in a unit with access to 24-hour medical care, so they can receive adequate assistance with their alcohol withdrawal symptoms or other problems. This may be an NHS hospital ward or medical unit, or a specialist residential rehabilitation service, depending on the situation.

## Staying sober in the long term

Cutting down and stopping drinking is often just the beginning, and most people will need some degree of help or support to stay alcohol-free in the long term.

### Useful contacts for alcohol problems

- Wiltshire Substance Misuse Service offers a range of treatment options for adults with alcohol or drug misuse problems. Services offered include guided self help, breaking free online service, motivational enhancement therapy and education and awareness around your alcohol or substance misuse. They offer medical assessment for alcohol detox which may take place at home or in a residential facility, and a choice of individual (1:1) or group work support. For more information call 0345 603 6993.
- Drinkline is the national alcohol helpline. If you're worried about your own or someone else's drinking, you can call this free helpline, in complete confidence. Call 0300 123 1110 (weekdays 9am – 8pm, weekends 11am – 4pm).
- Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is a free self-help group. Its “12-step” programme involves getting sober with the help of regular support groups. AA's belief is that people with drink problems need to give up alcohol permanently.
- Al-Anon Family Groups offer support and understanding to the families and friends of problem drinkers, whether they're still drinking or not. Alateen is part of Al-Anon and can be attended by 12- to 17-year-olds who are affected by another person's drinking, usually a parent.
- Addaction is a UK-wide treatment agency that helps individuals, families and communities to manage the effects of drug and alcohol misuse.
- Adfam is a national charity working with families affected by drugs and alcohol. Adfam operates an online message board and database of local support groups.

For further advice and information about diabetes and alcohol, please contact the Salisbury Community Diabetes Team, Diabetes Education Centre, Salisbury District Hospital, SP2 8BJ, tel. 01722 425176, email: [diabetes.centre@salisbury.nhs.uk](mailto:diabetes.centre@salisbury.nhs.uk)