

Am I Drinking Too Much??

What is 'too much'?

And why should I cut back a bit if others drink more than me?

These are really good questions. Read on to find out some interesting facts about alcohol and you.

Measuring how much you drink:

Alcohol can be measured as 'standard drinks'. Each standard drink contains the same amount of pure alcohol (ethanol). A midi glass of beer is a standard drink; while a schooner is 1.5. A small glass of wine is one standard drink, as is one standard bar nip of spirits. A stubby (bottle) of beer is 1.5 standard drinks. A premixed can of spirits (like bourbon and cola) is 1.5 to 2 standard drinks.

In social situations, we don't stick with public bar serves – the wine glasses are often bigger and can hold up to 2 standard drinks while spirits are sometimes served in unmeasured splashes. And what if you or your host tops up your glass when you are half way through a drink? So, watch what is being served carefully. Learn what a standard drink is and start counting accurately.

How much can you drink safely?

Doctors advising the Government have scanned years and years of research to answer this one and have done some research themselves. They have some pretty good suggestions that apply to most of us. However, the answer to this question depends on your gender and your medical situation. Here are some reliable guides:

A. For *anyone* it is advised that you have *at least* two days a week of NO alcohol at all. This is important to let your body get used to functioning without it and to have a break. We build up a dependence on mild or moderate amounts of alcohol. Your liver and heart and brain need a rest.

B. *Men* should limit their intake to four standard drinks per day, four to five days a week maximum.

C. *Women* should probably limit their intake to two standard drinks per day, three to four days a week maximum. If you are *pregnant* or think there is a chance you are pregnant, the safest thing to do is avoid alcohol completely. Alcohol affects the developing brain of an unborn child, especially in the first trimester. That little human being wouldn't choose brain damage if you asked them.

D. *Other considerations* include what medication you are taking (some mix with alcohol badly and any medical conditions. Check with your doctor and do follow their advice.

What is so bad about alcohol?

When you drink too much, either in one go or regularly, we know that any of the following problems can start to develop:

- ✗ Poorer memory and concentration
- ✗ Poorer balance and coordination
- ✗ Increased irritability and then relationship difficulties
- ✗ Increased risk of some cancers (mouth, throat, bowel, liver, breast)
- ✗ Increased damage to heart and blood vessels
- ✗ Poorer sexual functioning (e.g. erectile dysfunction)
- ✗ Damage to your liver
- ✗ High blood pressure and increased risk of stroke
- ✗ Increased gastro-intestinal problems
- ✗ Impaired immune system, leaving you more vulnerable to the flu and serious infections

What can I do?

If you are starting consider how to reduce your alcohol intake, here is a 4-point plan that most people find helpful:

Step 1. Crank up the motivation

- List the main **negatives** of drinking that affect you and those around you.
- As soon as you make a start, make a point of really noticing the **benefits** of drinking less (e.g. more energy, less hangovers, more money saved, better mood the next day, better concentration at work, more time to do other things, able to enjoy activities more etc...)
- Let a few **people** know that you have some goals to reduce your intake (then they can support you and help you to do other things and you might feel like you want to prove to them that you can succeed at this)

Step 2. Set an initial goal or two

Examples include:...

- I will make sure that I do not drink Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday just next week.
- I will only ever have one standard drink on any day when I work the next day this month.
- I will see what it is like to go out for dinner just once and have no alcohol at all.

Step 3. Turn that first goal into a new habit

- Pick a goal that you would like to do more regularly
- Develop some healthy rules for yourself (like never drinking alone; or never drinking when upset; or always having food with alcohol; or having a maximum of 4 or 5 no matter what)
- Habits are formed through force of repetition; so do it over and over even if it feels unnatural for a while
- Build in activities to help you (e.g. exercise with a friend one night; avoid high risk situations)

Step 4. Use “Control Strategies” when you are out

- Set a goal of the number of drinks that you will have in a night and pace yourself to that
- Make a point of counting drinks accurately (e.g. finish one glass at a time; no fill-ups...)
- Start with a non-alcoholic drink to get rid of that initial thirst
- Alternate alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks (have plenty of water handy)

If this proves too hard or you get really bad cravings, it's important that you tell your doctor

For more information or to discuss this issue with a trained psychologist, call (02) 9891-1766. Basten & Associates have expert clinical psychologists at Westmead, Chatswood and Sydney city.