

Section 2: General alcohol information

4. Alcohol and you

4.1. Introduction

Drinking is a social thing for many people. A lot of people drink alcohol when celebrating special occasions like birthdays or marriages.

Some people don't drink at all and this must be respected. Others may drink too much and their drinking may have consequences for their health and lifestyle.

4.2. What is alcohol?

The main thing in all alcoholic drinks is ethanol (ethyl alcohol – pure alcohol).

There are other alcohols, such as methyl and isopropyl, found in substances like methylated spirits, aftershaves and colognes, but these are dangerous and toxic to the body and can cause permanent damage if you drink them. So don't do it - not even as a joke!

A standard dose of alcohol is called a unit and a unit measure of drink contains 8g of ethanol (10ml) (see chapter 5 - *The amount of alcohol you are drinking*). Units are a good way of helping you keep track of how much you are drinking.

Alcohol is a legal socially acceptable drug.

4.3. Some alcohol facts

- Alcohol is a depressant drug, even though it may feel stimulating when drunk at first.
- It slows down a person's reactions. This effect is greatly magnified if alcohol is taken with other depressant drugs such as tranquillisers or sleeping pills. This is a dangerous combination.
- Mixing alcohol with any prescribed or over-the counter drugs can be risky. Ask your pharmacist or doctor for advice.
- Many people think alcohol warms you up but it doesn't. People will feel warm straight away but in fact our 'core' body temperature reduces. So be

careful when drinking outside. There is a real risk of hypothermia if we fall asleep outside in cold weather.

- Alcohol very quickly gets into your bloodstream. How quickly this happens is affected by certain things e.g. eating before drinking slows this down.

4.4. How does alcohol affect us?

Alcohol affects us in all sorts of ways. Because it reaches our muscles, heart and brain, it affects not only what we do but also our mood and the way we feel. We also expect alcohol to have an effect.

Alcohol will often make us feel physically different, as well as heighten our feelings. So when you have a drink you may feel more:

- Relaxed
- Open
- Carefree
- Confident

You may feel physically sick or unwell when you have had a drink. Also, you may feel more:

- Depressed
- Anxious
- Confused
- Forgetful
- Suspicious

Drinking very large amounts of alcohol is really risky. If you pass out or fall asleep there is a risk that you may choke on your own vomit.

And remember, often when people have got into fights or arguments or had an accident, it will be after they have had a drink. When drunk, people can take risks or behave in ways they wouldn't normally. For example, unprotected sex or arguing with family/friends or even strangers!

4.5. The dreaded hangover

Most of us have had a 'hangover'. It's one of the common ways our body shows us when we have drunk too much alcohol.

The symptoms of hangovers can include feeling:

- Thirsty - because alcohol uses water to get itself out of your body
- Hungry - when you pee too much you lose sugar from your body - low sugar levels make you want to eat
- Tired and weak – because of low blood sugar
- Ill with an upset tummy – due to the alcohol affecting the acids in your stomach

Did you know that darker drinks usually give you a worse hangover? It's because there are more chemicals called 'congeners' in dark drinks. Congeners irritate blood vessels and tissue in the brain. There are more congeners in red wine, brandy, and whisky. There are fewer congeners in vodka, champagne, and white wine.

4.6. Some top tips for the morning after

If you end up drinking more than you should there are a few things you can do:

- **Drink some water** before going to sleep, and have a glass of water beside the bed too
- **Take a painkiller** - soluble is best - it helps with the headache
- **Take an antacid** to settle your stomach
- **Have a snack** - drinking lowers your blood sugar level, **so eat** as soon as you can - bananas, cereal, or egg on toast are all good morning after snacks
- **Never ever do hair of the dog** – drinking more doesn't help
- **Have at least 48 hours off the booze** if it was a heavy session

4.7. Drinking too much regularly?

If you begin to drink heavily over a period of time, you may notice changes in the way you feel as well as physical things with your body. Some of these may be:

- Weight problems – alcohol has lots of calories
- Upset stomach – over a period of time heavy drinking will not help with things like ulcers and the acids in your stomach
- Regular seriously bad headaches – alcohol takes out water from your body – with low water levels you can get bad headaches
- Feeling more anxious for longer times
- Getting stressed more or your mood changing quickly
- Loss of balance
- Shaking or numbness in fingers and toes
- Feeling down or depressed more often than not
- Not being able to concentrate as well as you used to
- Difficulty in sleeping
- Skin problems
- Blurred vision
- Raised blood pressure

There are other potential damaging health effects that are related to long term heavy drinking that you may be more at risk from, but may not see or feel like:

- Liver disease
- Cancers (especially of the mouth and throat)
- Strokes
- Serious memory loss
- Sexual problems
- Damage to nervous system
- Diabetes
- Epilepsy
- Damage to your immune system – how you deal with infections

Some of these problems will get better if you cut down or stop drinking. There is a lot more information on the effects of heavy problem drinking on your body in chapter 6.

5. The amount of alcohol you are drinking

5.1. What is ABV%?

All alcoholic drinks contain pure alcohol (ethanol) but in different amounts.

A pint of beer may contain about 4 or 5 or 6% alcohol, a bottle of whisky about 40% and an average bottle of wine around 12-13%.

Different measures are used for different drinks according to their strength.

By law, the alcohol strength of bottles and canned drinks must be shown on the label and on notices in pubs. This may be shown by:

- Alcohol % vol,
- Alc % vol,
- % vol, or
- %ABV

Basically, these all mean the same - percentage of alcohol by volume. They show how much of the liquid in the bottle or can is pure alcohol.

5.2. What are units?

Units are a way of working out how much you are drinking and how much alcohol different drinks contain. A unit of alcohol is **10ml** of *pure* alcohol. Counting units of alcohol can help you to keep track of the amount you're drinking.

It is important to know the strength of drink (%ABV) and volume/amount of liquid to know how many units a drink contains.

A bottle of wine, depending on the %ABV, can contain anywhere between 5.3 units and 11.3 units. For example, a bottle of sparkling wine at 7% ABV contains 5.3 units. A bottle of red wine at 15% ABV contains 11.3 units.

If you want to here's how to work it out:

Multiply the volume of drink by %ABV, and then divide by 1000.

For example: 175ml of wine x 13 %ABV = 2,275÷1000 = 2.275 (2.3 units).

Or if you know the amount you have drunk in litres and the %ABV then it is easy to work out the units.

The %ABV per litre is the same as the number of units in that drink. So if you have a litre of 6% ABV lager – you have had six units. If you have half a litre of 14% ABV wine you have had 7 units. Working out units can be fiddly but it gets easier with practice and it can really help to keep track of how much you are drinking.

The list below shows the number of units of alcohol in common drinks:-

Beer, ale and stout	UNITS				
	<i>Bottle (330ml)</i>	<i>Can (440ml)</i>	<i>Can (500ml)</i>	<i>½ Pint (284ml)</i>	<i>1 Pint (568ml)</i>
Worthingtons (3.6%)	1.2	1.6	1.8	1	2
Tetleys (3.8%)	1.3	1.7	1.9	1.1	2.2
John Smiths (4%)	1.3	1.8	2	1.1	2.3
Boddingtons (4%)	1.3	1.8	2	1.1	2.3
Caffreys (4.2%)	1.4	1.8	2.1	1.2	2.4
McEwans Export (4.5%)	1.5	2	2.3	1.3	2.6
Newcastle Brown (4.7%)	1.6	2.1	2.4	1.3	2.7
Premium Strong (5%)	1.7	2.2	2.5	1.4	2.8
(6%)	2	2.6	3	1.7	3.4
(7%)	2.3	3.1	3.5	2	4
Murphys	1.3	1.8	2	1.1	2.3
Guinness - Draught / extra cold (4.3%)	1.4	1.9	2.2	1.2	2.4
Guinness Red /Beamish (4.2%)	1.4	1.8	2.1	1.2	2.4
Guinness Original (can be up to 6%)	2	2.6	3	1.7	3.4
Guinness Foreign Extra Stout (sold in Europe 7.5%)	2.5	3.3	3.8	2.1	4.3
Lager	Bottle (330ml)	Can (440ml)	Can (500ml)	½ Pint	Pint
Fosters (4%)	1.3	1.8	2	1.1	2.3
Carlsberg (4%)	1.3	1.8	2	1.1	2.3
Carling (4.1%)	1.4	1.8	2.1	1.2	2.3
Miller (4.7%)	1.6	2.1	2.4	1.3	2.7
Stella Artois (5.2%)	1.7	2.3	2.6	1.5	3
Kronenbourg (5%)	1.7	2.2	2.5	1.4	2.8
Grolsch (5%)	1.7	2.2	2.5	1.4	2.8
Becks (5%)	1.7	2.2	2.5	1.4	2.8
Carlsberg Export (5%)	1.7	2.2	2.5	1.4	2.8
Budweiser (5%)	1.7	2.2	2.5	1.4	2.8
Budvar (5%)	1.7	2.2	2.5	1.4	2.8
Carlsberg Special Brew (9%)	3	4	4.5	2.6	5.1
Tennants Super (9%)	3	4	4.5	2.6	5.1
Kestrel Super (9%)	3	4	4.5	2.6	5.1

Cider	Bottle (330ml)	Can (440ml)	Can (500ml)	Pint (568ml)	Litre (1000ml)
Bulmers Original / Magners (4.5%)	1.5	2	2.3	2.6	4.5
Strongbow (5.3%)	1.7	2.3	2.7	3	5.3
Dry Blackthorn (6%)	2	2.6	3	3.4	6
Scrumpy Jack (6%)	2	2.6	3	3.4	6
White Lightning (7.5%)	2.5	3.3	3.8	4.3	7.5
Frosty Jack (7.5%)	2.5	3.3	3.8	4.3	7.5
Strongbow Super (7.5%)	2.5	3.3	3.8	4.3	7.5
Strong (9%+)	3 +	4 +	4.5+	5 +	9 +
Alcopops / Ready Mixed Drinks	1 bottle (275ml)				
Smirnoff Ice(5.5%)	1.5				
Bacardi Breezer (5%)	1.4				
WKD (5%)	1.4				
Reef (5%)	1.4				
Liqueurs	Small single (25ml)	Large single (35ml)	Small double (50ml)	Large double (70ml)	
Tequila (38%)	1	1.3			
Baileys (17%)	0.5	1	1	1.2	
Tia Maria (26.5%)	1	1	1.3	1.9	
Dark Spirits					Bottle (1000ml)
Blended whisky, malt, bourbon, rum (40%)	1	1.4	2	2.8	40
White Spirits					
Gin, vodka, bacardi (37.5%)	1	1.3	1.9	2.6	38
Gin, vodka (40%)	1	1.4	2	2.8	40
Wine (red or white), Champagne /sparkling)	Small glass (125ml)	Standard glass (175ml)	Large glass (250ml)	½ Bottle (375ml)	Bottle (750ml)
7%	1	1.2	1.8	2.6	5.3
11%	1.4	1.9	2.8	4.2	8.3
12%	1.5	2.1	3	4.5	9
13%	1.6	2.3	3.3	4.9	9.8
14%	1.8	2.5	3.5	5.3	10.5
15%	1.9	2.6	3.8	5.6	11
Fortified wine (sherry / port/ tonic)	Small double (50ml)			Bottle (700ml)	
15%	1			10.5	
17.5%	1			12.3	
20%	1			14	

5.3. Why is this important?

It sounds complicated and boring doesn't it.....but.....

You should drink sensibly and safely and it is a good idea to know what exactly you are drinking. A lot of drinks are stronger than they used to be:

1 glass of wine does not equal 1 unit - it's not that easy!

A lot of companies now show the number of units contained within certain drinks on the packaging. This is helpful in giving a clearer picture of how much a person is drinking.

**SO MAKE SURE YOU CHECK THE UNITS
AND REMEMBER HOME MEASURES TEND TO BE LARGER!**

5.4. Low and high risks- so how much alcohol can I drink?

The recommended daily drinking limits are set as:

MEN

If you drink between 3 and 4 units a day or less, there are no significant risks to your health

LOW RISK

WOMEN

If you drink between 2 and 3 units a day or less, there are no significant risks to your health

The risk of harm from drinking above sensible levels increases the more alcohol that you drink, and the more often you drink over these levels.

MEN

If you regularly drink over 8 units a day (or 50 units a week)

HIGH RISK of ALCOHOL RELATED HARM

WOMEN

If you regularly drink over 6 units a day (or over 35 units a week)

If you go over the daily limits, the Department of Health suggests that alcohol should be avoided for at least 48 hours. This gives the body time to recover. Remember the government advice is that women who are pregnant or trying to conceive should avoid drinking alcohol. But if you do choose to drink don't drink more than 1 -2 units once or twice a week and don't get drunk!

THIS IS REALLY IMPORTANTREMEMBER YOU SHOULDN'T DRINK:

- **Before or when driving**
- **Before or when using machinery and equipment**
- **Before or when using electrical equipment**
- **Before or when using ladders or working at heights**
- **Before swimming or taking part in active sport**
- **Before or when taking some medicines**
- **If a doctor or other health professional tells you to stop**

6. Alcohol and your body

6.1. Introduction

When you drink alcohol it goes into your stomach and small intestine. It then gets absorbed into your bloodstream, travels rapidly to all the parts of your body and begins to affect all the cells.

6.2. Some things to think about

- Some drinks enter your bloodstream quickly. Others are much slower to take effect. Among the fastest is champagne. Neat whisky, gin and vodka are slower.
- Alcohol might take longer to have an effect if your stomach is full.
- Alcohol may have different effects on you, depending on your mood, the atmosphere, your environment and how you expect alcohol to affect you.
- Alcohol might take longer to affect you if you're a regular heavy drinker. This is because your body is more used to it (often referred to as 'a tolerance').
- The speed at which you drink might also affect the outcome.
- The same amount of alcohol consumed by a woman and a man can lead to higher blood alcohol concentration in the woman. This is because women can have a smaller volume of blood circulation or a smaller liver that doesn't break down the alcohol as quickly. Also, women generally have less fluid in their bodies than men.

REMEMBER - The amount of alcohol in the blood depends on lots of things:

- The amount of alcohol you drink
- The strength of the drink
- How quickly you are drinking
- The amount of food in your stomach
- Whether you are a man or a woman
- Your weight
- Your health

6.3. Is alcohol good for you?

Lots of people associate drinking with relaxation, socialising and having a good time. If you're an adult in good health and with a good diet, drinking within the sensible drinking guidelines probably won't harm you.

Remember the advice is:

- Males should not regularly drink more than 3 - 4 units a day
- Females should not regularly drink more than 2 - 3 units a day

It's useful to allow your body to experience some alcohol-free days. Especially up to 48 hours after a heavy drinking session to allow your body time to recover.

For people at risk from coronary heart disease, men over 40 years and women who are past the menopause, it's believed that 1 - 2 units a day, or every other day, possibly can reduce these risks. BUT this is only for a small amount of people.

IT'S BETTER TO REMEMBER THAT you don't have to drink alcohol to achieve a healthy lifestyle.

GUESS WHAT - a healthy low fat, low sugar diet with a bit of exercise is what you need. Try to cut down on junk food – which is high in fat, sugar and salt – this can help your body cope with alcohol and its effects.

A bit of exercise can go a long way. It can reduce stress, allow you to sleep better, lose a bit of weight, and feel better about yourself.

Walking is one of the best forms of exercise and it's free! If you take exercise with other people (for instance, go to a class) you get to meet a different group of people.

And, of course, it is always good to try and cut down on or give up smoking (The NHS Quitline - 0800 002 200).

6.4. Long term heavy drinking and the effect on your body

Now let's visit the main areas of our body and see how they're affected when someone regularly drinks more than the sensible drinking limits.

THE LIVER

You know our body is fantastic – especially the liver

.....the liver breaks the alcohol down into less harmful substances BUT

If you are drinking lots and lots the liver becomes overworked and struggles to cope.....

When the liver has to deal with more alcohol than it can handle it's likely that damage will occur but this can happen in stages. So things might happen like:

Fatty liver: deposits of fat in the liver - full recovery is possible.

Alcoholic hepatitis: inflammation of liver - full recovery is possible.

Cirrhosis: a permanently scarred and damaged liver.

THE STOMACH AND OESOPHAGUS

Excessive use of alcohol tends to have a corrosive impact on the linings of these organs causing conditions such as:

Gastritis: an inflammation of the stomach cleared up by avoiding alcohol.

Ulcers: may not be caused by alcohol but are certainly irritated by excessive use of alcohol.

Reflux: can cause ulceration, tearing, bleeding around the stomach and oesophagus.

THE PANCREAS

This is a large gland behind the stomach which secretes enzymes and releases insulin. Regular binge drinking can cause serious damage to this gland.

Acute pancreatitis: an inflammation of the pancreas. This causes severe pain with symptoms sometimes persisting even when alcohol is avoided.

Chronic pancreatitis: similar to the acute version and sufferers may also develop diabetes. This condition usually follows many years of excessive alcohol use.

THE BRAIN AND NERVOUS SYSTEM

Persistent heavy drinking is often linked to a number of specific forms of brain damage.

Wernicke's encephalopathy: often confused with signs of intoxication. It is caused by a lack of thiamine (vitamin B1) and can be treated by injection of the vitamin, but is often undiagnosed.

Korsakoff's syndrome: can develop from untreated Wernicke's encephalopathy and is characterised by significant memory loss (similar to dementia). Improvement is variable even with avoiding alcohol.

Risk of above is higher if heavy drinking is combined with a poor diet.

THE HEART AND CIRCULATORY SYSTEM

The main area of concern in this part of the body is raised blood pressure. This can easily result from drinking a lot over a long time. Raised blood pressure increases the risk of heart disease and stroke.

HIGH RISK GROUPS

We also know some groups of people are perhaps more at risk than others:

Older people may have a liver that is less efficient and the body has less fluid. Older people also tend to use more prescription drugs which can interact with alcohol.

Pregnant women can put their unborn child at increased risk if drinking a lot. This can be linked to a range of foetal disorders. Particularly a risk when drinking is combined with smoking and poor diet.

Young people because their bodies are still developing. Also, young people might drink less often than adults but, when they do, may drink large amounts.

Users of other substances because alcohol used with other drugs (prescribed and illicit) causes many adverse reactions.

6.5. Things to think about

Alcohol gets into the body quickly and can have a damaging effect on your body if you drink a lot over a long time.

Don't worry if some of the things mentioned in this chapter are a bit scary. The important thing to remember is that you can give your body a breather by cutting down the amount you drink. Often your body can feel the benefits from small reductions in the amount you drink.

7. Alcohol in our lives

7.1. Why do we drink?

We all drink for reasons

.....and there are many reasons why we drink.

'I like the taste'

'It helps me relax'

'I like a drink after a game'

'You always have a drink at a party'

'Drinking makes me feel less lonely and bored'

'It's sociable I like it'

'All my mates drink'

'It makes me more confident especially when talking to boys'

'When I'm having a bad time it makes dealing with things easier'

'I started drinking when I was very young so I've always done it'

We all drink for different reasons. Some people drink more than others and there may be specific reasons for this.

People may drink more to cope with difficult things in their lives such as:

- Living with an abusive partner
- Dealing with a mental health problem
- Trying to deal with things that happened in their childhood like sexual or physical abuse
- Coping with money or housing worries
- Handling a difficult time like a divorce or break up of a relationship or an accident
- Missing a person who has died

We all use booze in different ways - are some of the reasons why you drink mentioned?

7.2. Alcohol and our behaviour

Alcohol cannot behave badly – only people can!

Many people believe that they can excuse their behaviour by 'blaming it on the drink'.

It's not true to say that alcohol causes crime or makes us get into trouble. That's something that only we can do.

The effect alcohol has on our behaviour is not only related to the amount of alcohol but also the situation and our feelings at the time.

Some people become excitable, 'wild' or angry when they are intoxicated. Others feel depressed, 'love everyone' or fall asleep.

It seems that we learn different ways of behaving which we associate with drinking alcohol. We often link drinking with acting aggressively, shouting, flirting, 'letting our hair down' or being emotional.

This may be different to our usual way of behaving. It could be why we use the 'excuse' of drinking to let off steam!

For most people who drink, alcohol is a source of fun and enjoyment.

Sometimes, however, when drinking we may behave in ways that can get us or others into trouble.

7.3. Binge drinking

Often it is seen as acceptable to 'binge' drink, an 'all or nothing' attitude to alcohol.

We may drink a lot on certain occasions like weekends and holidays. This sudden heavy drinking session often leads to becoming very drunk and our behaviour - what we do - becomes less controlled.

People often can't do simple tasks after relatively small amounts of alcohol. The combination of less control of what we do and less ability to do it can be lethal!

Alcohol is a drug. It often makes us feel more relaxed but also less inhibited. In some situations this can lead to:

- Fights and arguments
- Dodgy decisions about sex and later regrets
- Crimes or violence
- Accidents
- Getting into situations where you don't want to be
- Not feeling great afterwards – you might get into trouble at work for not turning up on time

Often a binge drinking session is defined as drinking double the recommended number of units (2 or 3 units for a woman and 3 or 4 units for a man) or more in one session.

That means a binge could be seen as drinking more than six units a day for a woman or more than eight units for a man.

Some people who drink regularly would perhaps not feel or behave as if they were drunk at these levels. Others would be very drunk indeed.

However, if you are going to drink a lot over a short period of time there are probably going to be consequences. Some of these can be very serious. Remember alcohol is a factor related to a lot of crimes including many assaults, murder and rape cases (between 50 and 80%).

7.4. Alcohol, our mood and behaviour

Alcohol can change our mood. We can feel more relaxed, merry, aggressive or depressed and suicidal when we are drinking.

Our moods affect our behaviour. So the impact of alcohol on our mood will have an impact on our behaviour.

Drinking may change our behaviour at the time but it can also affect our behaviour afterwards.

As our bodies cope with the increase of alcohol in our bloodstream, and then flushing this out again, we can feel jumpy, anxious and miserable.

The next day our behaviour can be affected by this mood swing. For some people this leads them to drink again to dampen these feelings. This can increase their general feelings of anxiety and depression.

This can colour the way they see their lives and their everyday behaviour.

Not thinking about how and when we drink can make us a nuisance to other people and put ourselves at risk of experiencing a range of problems.

The only way to avoid this is to take care in the way we drink – and think about it!

7.5. Driving – what does “over the limit” mean?

The simple advice is not to drink and drive.

The UK limit for being legal to drive is 80mg alcohol in 100 millilitres of blood, or 35mg of alcohol to 100ml of breath, or 100mg of alcohol per 100ml of urine.

You are more than twice as likely to have an accident at this level as if you had nothing to drink. Any amount of alcohol in your blood affects your body especially your co-ordination. It is best to drink nothing if you need to drive.

Remember lager, beer, and wine all vary in strength. You may think you know you are under the limit but really you could be over the limit.

You also need to remember that when drinking at home we often pour much larger measures than we would get in a pub. One drink at home could be three times the units that you would get in a pub.

Having a driving license will be important for a lot of jobs. You don't want to lose it!

So if you are going to drive, you should not drink!

8. Alcohol and methadone

8.1. Introduction

You may be having problems with other drugs. You may be on a methadone prescription – if so then this chapter will be useful. If you are taking methadone and getting stable there are things you need to know about the effects and the risks of ‘topping-up’ with alcohol.

8.2. Alcohol, methadone and the body

Alcohol is a depressant drug. Its use can sometimes lead to problems just like any other drug. When we use the word ‘depressant’ we’re talking about the effects alcohol has on the brain (which co-ordinates all the body’s functions) like slurred speech, slower reactions, slower breathing and heartbeat, etc.

Methadone is a **Class A depressant** drug that’s legally prescribed as a substitute for opiates such as heroin. It is used to help people who are finding it difficult to cope with their drug use. They may want a bit of space to help start reducing their drug use or to come off illegal drugs like heroin and are finding it difficult to reduce without some type of chemical support.

When you take methadone, you get the chemicals you need to stop acute withdrawal symptoms. The effects can last up to 24 hours, so most people get prescribed one dose each day.

There are two main types of treatments using methadone:

- **Maintenance** – stabilising people who are still chaotic or those who experience problems when they start to reduce their dose
- **Reduction** – gradual reduction of methadone dose until the person is drug free

8.3. Methadone and your liver

Methadone does NOT damage the body!

In most cases the liver easily breaks down methadone and it passes through the kidneys into the urine. However, some people may have liver damage

caused by alcohol or blood borne viruses like hepatitis B or hepatitis C. The extra work for a damaged liver to break down methadone can cause problems. Methadone can affect the brain and cause a reduced cough reflex and slower, shallower breathing. Both can add to the risk of overdose, especially if you take too much methadone or mix it with alcohol.

8.4. Why do people use alcohol and methadone together?

Sometimes when people are prescribed methadone they also drink alcohol.

This can be for many reasons including:

- You might not think your methadone dose is powerful enough
- Alcohol is a legal drug and so it's easy to get your hands on
- You're using alcohol to block out the effects of life
- You're starting to socialise again and enjoy using alcohol

8.5. What's wrong with mixing alcohol and methadone?

Methadone doesn't cause any harm when broken down by the liver... but alcohol can!

It's estimated that 1 in 3 drug users have the blood borne virus hepatitis C. This can be transmitted by shared needles and injecting equipment. All hepatitis viruses cause damage to the liver. If your liver is already damaged and you're drinking alcohol, it will irritate your liver even more and could lead to serious liver damage.

When someone who is on methadone drinks, the methadone gives them a 'head start' and they may lose control very quickly.

Anyone who mixes alcohol with drugs (prescribed or illicit) runs the risk of having unpredictable effects. Choking to death on your own vomit is a real risk for people who mix alcohol and methadone. If you're sick while under the influence of alcohol and methadone you'll be less likely to realise what's going on.

8.6. Speak to someone

Sometimes people feel that they're not getting enough from their methadone and they then try to 'top up' the effect by using other drugs or alcohol. If you feel that your methadone is not working for you then speak to your GP, drug worker or pharmacist about it. If you are currently drinking or considering drinking sociably, we would advise you to talk to your drugs worker or GP about this.

Don't mix alcohol and methadone!

**IF YOU ARE TRYING TO GIVE UP HEROIN YOU DESERVE
A MEDAL...NOT LIVER DAMAGE!
METHADONE AND ALCOHOL DON'T MIX**

9. Alcohol and other drugs

9.1. Introduction

Alcohol can be very dangerous to take with other drugs. It is especially dangerous with other depressant drugs such as barbiturates, heroin, methadone or tranquillisers and drugs such as anti-depressants, anti-histamines and painkillers. Mixing these drugs and alcohol can lead to a fatal overdose.

Alcohol has an effect on your body especially your brain. It can also double up the effects of other drugs on your body, particularly opiates and sedatives – you could go into a coma or stop breathing.

9.2. Alcohol and over the counter drugs

Many over the counter medications are combinations of drugs you can buy without a prescription. These should never be mixed with other medications or alcohol.

Pain relievers, cough medicines, cold and flu remedies, decongestants, anti-histamines and stomach/digestion medicines can all react badly with alcohol.

9.3. Alcohol and prescribed drugs

Taking prescription drugs should always be done under medical supervision. Using prescription drugs without medical supervision can be dangerous and even fatal. It can also be illegal.

Inform your doctor about your past or current history of substance use. Alcohol can have an effect on the action of a lot of prescribed drugs such as anti-depressants, tranquillisers, sleeping tablets, and drugs for HIV/AIDS. A medical dose of barbiturates (sleepers) can easily become lethal if taken with alcohol. Find out about how the drugs could interact with alcohol, other prescription medicines, and over-the-counter medicines - your doctor or local pharmacist can advise you.

Don't use other people's prescription medications and don't share yours.

9.4. Alcohol and illegal drugs

Alcohol taken with illegal drugs, such as heroin and cocaine, can also be very dangerous. Deaths from heroin overdose often involve alcohol. Using cocaine with alcohol can be linked to increased risk of heart attack.

If you have – or are at risk of having – hepatitis, you should not drink alcohol at all. Your liver may already be damaged and drinking a lot can really increase the risks of long term damage.

Some other illegal drugs are particularly dangerous with alcohol. For instance, taking Gamma Hydroxybutyrate (GHB) with alcohol has been fatal.

You can find more information on alcohol and other drugs from Drugscope 020 7940 7500 or www.drugscope.org.uk

10. Is my drinking a problem?

10.1. How do I know if my drinking is a problem?

- When does drinking become unsafe?
- When does social drinking become problem drinking?
- When does 'normal' use become harmful?

These are difficult questions to answer. Alcohol use affects us all differently so what is a problem will vary from person to person and may depend on the community they live in. This is because there are differences in legal, cultural and social issues. For some groups what is normal 'social' drinking may still be harmful to our health.

You might think you know what a 'person with a drink problem' looks like. Think again! Most people with drink problems are not 'alcoholics', and many will drink only a few days a week.

You have a problem with drink if the problems outweigh the benefits.

It is useful to think about four areas of your life (remember the **four 'L's'**):

- **Love life** - is your drinking causing problems in your relationship?
- **Livelihood** - is it causing problems at work?
- **Liver** - is it causing problems with your health?
- **Law** - is it getting you into problems with the law?

If your drinking is causing problems in any of these four areas, maybe you should think about cutting down.

It is important to think about:

- When do you drink?
- How do you drink?
- Where do you drink?
- Who do you drink with?
- What do you drink?

Alcohol misuse can lead to a greater risk of harm. It depends on many things:

- The amount of alcohol you drink and how often you drink
- Your life experiences and how you live
- Whether or not you use (or misuse) any other drugs
- The way you use (or misuse) any other drugs
- Where you drink - a crowded and noisy environment like a pub or club (which can increase the risk of getting into a fight or being injured) or drinking alone at home

10.2. Signs of problem drinking

Below are some of the signs and symptoms of someone developing a drink problem. If you recognise any of these you may want to do something about it now. As you read the list below, ask yourself:

- Which ones are familiar to you and your drinking history? You can tick the ones that apply or write them out yourself.
- What other symptoms or problem drinking signs have you noticed in your life (getting into fights, missing work, arguing with others or poor health)?

10.3. Spot the signs

- Getting drunk regularly
- Unable to stop drinking when you start
- Needing to drink more for the same effect
- Losing interest in activities and hobbies because of drinking
- Drinking alone more often than not
- Making excuses to drink
- Letting people down as a result of having been drinking
- Regularly smelling of alcohol
- Feeling more and more guilty about the way you drink
- Shaking in the morning

Getting drunk regularly

- You are unable to have a good night out without getting drunk.
- You are unable to enjoy life without drink.
- There is a risk that your drinking might get more out of control.

Unable to stop drinking when you start

- You find it very difficult to stop drinking after you have started (even if you only drink a couple of times a week).
- This might be because you feel you can't 'control' your drinking, or feel under pressure from friends or mix with heavy drinkers socially.

Needing to drink more for the same effect

- If you drink regularly, the body adapts to having alcohol in the blood all the time. When this happens, you may need to drink more to get the same effect.
- You are building up tolerance – a sign that something is possibly wrong rather than a sign that it isn't.

Losing interest in activities and hobbies because of drinking

- If you are giving up some of the things you used to enjoy and drinking instead then there might be a problem.

Drinking alone more often than not

- Many people who develop alcohol problems say that the turning point was when they began to drink by themselves on a regular basis.

Making excuses to drink

- Finding more and more reasons for a drink (celebrate, say hello, say goodbye, drown your sorrows, forget your problems, etc.) might be a sign that things are getting out of control.

Letting people down as a result of having been drinking

- Your drinking lets your loved ones down.
- You put them into risky situations.

- You hurt them.
- Drink is a positive part of many of our lives. It should not be the most important thing.

Regularly smelling of alcohol

- Your work is perhaps suffering if you have been drinking too much.
- Regularly smelling of alcohol is a warning sign.

Feeling more and more guilty about the way you drink

- You may be feeling increased guilt over the way you drink and how that affects the people around you.

Shaking in the morning

- Heavy drinkers can get shaky or trembling hands in the morning.
- This may also be at the same time you regularly feel that you need a drink to 'kick start' the day (hair of the dog).