Alcohol – Sensible drinking

A drink or two may help you to relax and socialise and it may even do you some good, but regularly overdoing it is associated with various health risks. If you regularly drink too much alcohol, not only do you risk your health, but depending on how much and how often you drink, your work and relationships may also be affected and there is risk of breaking the law.

Sensible drinking involves knowing what your limits are and being aware of how much you are drinking and your pattern of alcohol use. It is important to understand how to drink sensibly to enjoy alcohol in moderation as part of a healthy lifestyle.

Alcohol and health

Drinking within safe limits is unlikely to do you any harm and for certain people, a small amount of alcohol – that is about one or two units of alcohol a day – may be good for your heart. But in truth, there are more effective ways to protect your heart, including eating a healthy balanced diet and taking regular exercise.

Evidence shows that alcohol use increases health risks such as:
- malnutrition due to its lack of nutritional value (e.g. vitamin B deficiency);
- overweight because of its high calorie content;
- digestive system problems, such as oesophagitis, chronic gastritis and gastric ulcers;
- liver problems, such as hepatitis, cirrhosis and even liver cancer;
- high blood pressure and heart problems;
- certain cancers, such as cancers of oral cavity, pharynx, larynx, esophagus, colorectum and female breast;
- addiction to alcohol.

What are sensible drinking limits?
The Department of Health guidelines recommend not regularly drinking more than:
- three or four units a day for men
- two or three units a day for women

‘Regularly’ means every day or most days of the week. This does not mean you can save up all the ‘allowance’ for a weekend binge. A drinking binge is generally defined as drinking double the daily recommended units in one session. Binge drinking for men, therefore, is drinking more than eight units of alcohol – or about three pints of strong beer. For women, it’s drinking more than six units of alcohol – the equivalent of two large glasses of wine.

Why are sensible drinking limits different for women?
The recommended limits are lower for women than for men because women have different amounts of fat, muscle and water in their bodies than men. This affects the way women and men’s bodies cope with alcohol. As a result, women are more likely to develop health problems, such as liver disease, at lower levels of alcohol consumption than men.

How many units in your drink?

One unit is equal to 10ml by volume or 8g by weight, of pure alcohol – the amount of alcohol an average adult can process in one hour. Be aware that alcoholic drinks vary in strength; for example, some wines and lagers contain more alcohol than others. What’s more, bars and restaurants offer a variety of measures, such as spirits in measurements of 25, 35 or 50ml, and wine glass measurements of 125, 175 or 250ml.

- One pint of lower strength (4%) lager or beer = 2 units
- One pint of medium strength (5%) lager or beer = 3 units
- One single measure of spirit (40%) = 1 unit
- One small glass (125ml) of higher strength (14.5%) wine = 2 units
- One large glass (250ml) of higher strength (14.5%) wine = 4 units
- One large glass (250ml) of lower strength (12%) wine = 3 units
Drinking sensibly
Drinking sensibly does not mean missing out on all the fun. The first steps are to understand how much and how often you are drinking. Start by keeping a record of how much you drink over a week. If you are exceeding your safe limits, think about when and where you are drinking and how much. You may be having a glass of wine with most evening meals, a lunchtime drink once a week and a planned night out every Friday or Saturday. Remembering a few simple tips can help you drink sensibly.

• Have something to eat before you drink, and if possible, while you are drinking – this slows down how quickly your body absorbs alcohol.
• Start with low-alcohol or alcohol-free drinks, or alternate these with alcoholic drinks. You could also switch to a lower alcoholic drink.
• Pace yourself – enjoy your drink slowly. Do not drink in rounds or you may be drinking at a much faster pace.
• Buy yourself an alcohol measure for your home so that you can see how much you are putting in your drink. Keep track with an alcohol app when you’re out on the town.
• Instead of going to the pub or having a drink at home, try going to the gym or doing another activity you enjoy such as having a bath.
• Do not drink alcohol every day of the week – have at least two alcohol-free days.

When not to drink?
It takes about one hour for your liver to break down one unit of alcohol. The more you drink, the longer it will take for the effects of alcohol to clear. There are times when not drinking alcohol at all is the safest choice. These include the following.

• Before you plan to drive or when you are driving.
• Before or when you are operating machinery or electrical equipment.
• Before or during swimming or other active sports.
• When you are taking certain medicines – always read the patient information leaflet that comes with your medicine and ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice.
• When you are pregnant or trying for a baby. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can increase the risk of miscarriage and affect the development of your unborn baby.

Drink Driving is a Criminal Offence
Alcohol can be the culprit for traffic accidents and traffic offences because it affects your driving ability. It impairs your judgement of speed and distance, slows down your reaction time, affects coordination of your body’s movements and blurs your vision. It lingers in your body longer than you think.

In Hong Kong, the penalties on drink driving offences had been increased since February 2009. Apart from a maximum fine of HK$25,000, 3 years’ imprisonment and 10 driving offence points, offender on the first conviction is liable to be disqualified from driving for a period for not less than 3 months and be mandated to attend a driving improving course. In addition, the Police have been carrying out random breath tests extensively over the territory to deter and combat drink driving to enhance road safety.

The content here is intended for general information and does not replace the need for personal advice from your doctor.