

Is your drinking okay?

Alcohol and your health



The Alcohol and Your Health booklets

This booklet is one of the six booklets in the Alcohol and Your Health series.

Each of the booklets is written for a particular group. Four are for the drinker experiencing problems, one is for those close to the drinker, and one is for practitioners working in a brief intervention setting.

The series Alcohol and Your Health (2013) is by Ian MacEwan and is the fifth edition of the series originally called Your Drinking and Your Health written by Ian MacEwan and Greg Ariel, and based on concepts developed by the Scottish DRAMS project.

The Alcohol and Your Health series includes:

Is your drinking okay?

Cutting down

Stopping drinking

Maintaining the change

Concerned about someone's drinking?

Helping with problem drinking

Introduction

This booklet will help you decide if your drinking is okay. If you decide you want to make a change to your drinking, see these other booklets in the Alcohol and Your Health series: *Cutting down*, *Stopping drinking* and *Maintaining the change*.

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Part 1

Do you enjoy a drink?

Most people drink alcohol and enjoy it. We use it to celebrate, to enjoy the company of friends, and to have a good time.

Alcohol can be enjoyed with little harm.

This booklet helps you to check your drinking and see if you may be at risk of getting into difficulties.

It will help to prevent problems if you are drinking too much, but maybe you're not overdoing it. Read on to find out.

Start with the benefits of drinking – everyone who drinks gets something out of it. Read the quiz below about the good things you get out of drinking, and circle **Yes** beside the statements that are right for you.

Quiz A

I can unwind after a few drinks.	Yes	No
I can have a good laugh with friends after a few drinks.	Yes	No
I'm not very good at talking, but after a few drinks I can be quite good company.	Yes	No
I like the taste of my drink.	Yes	No
Having a few drinks with friends is my main way of relaxing.	Yes	No
After a hard day's work, there's nothing better than relaxing with a drink.	Yes	No
There's nothing like a few drinks to give a good atmosphere – it's just not there without them.	Yes	No
When you meet people, they like you to have a drink with them – they think you're a bit of a wet blanket if you don't.	Yes	No
Drinking helps break down barriers between people.	Yes	No
If I didn't go for a few drinks, there would be nothing for me to do.	Yes	No

Now count the number of times you have answered **Yes** to these statements.

Between one and three

Yes. You enjoy a drink but it's not the be-all and end-all for you.

Between four and six

Drink is important to you, and you get a lot out of it.

Between seven and ten

Drink is very important to you, and you would miss it if you cut down or stopped.

This tells you something about your drinking. Read on for a few facts about alcohol that you might find interesting.

Part 2

Alcohol: a few facts

Do you know how much you drink?

Problems come from drinking too much, so it's important to know how much you drink.

A good way to start is to convert everything into standard drinks (SDs).

A SD drink is **10** grams of alcohol, which is approximately a half-pint of beer, a small glass of wine or a pub measure of spirits.

A look at the table on the next page will show you the number of SDs in different drinks.

A common mistake most people make is to think there's less alcohol in beer than in other alcoholic drinks. Another is to believe that if you drink just beer you can't be doing any harm.

Rule of thumb:

- **a half-pint of beer** equals **one glass of wine** equals **one measure of spirits**, which equals one SD
- **one pint of beer** (a handle) equals **two glasses of wine** equals **two measures of spirits**, which equals **two SDs**.

Now, think about how much you had to drink during the last typical week.

First, think about what you had to drink in the seven days just past.

If that week was roughly typical of your usual drinking, it's a good week to use. If not, try to remember the most recent week that was typical – without going so far back in the past that you can't remember what happened. Fill in the chart on page 8 with what you had to drink during this typical week.



Most wines you buy are 12.5% alcohol, although some are as low as 8% or as high as 14%. A glass (100ml) of 12.5% wine is one SD. Wine is rarely served in 100ml glasses these days; bars usually serve 150ml glasses. Think about how many glasses you get from a bottle. Most home serves are five glasses to the bottle: nearly two SDs to the glass.

How many standard drinks in different drinks?



* RTD (READY TO DRINK)
 ALC refers to alcohol content by volume

How many standard drinks in your drink?

To help you fill out the chart on page 7, we have given an example below to show you what you might write.

Day	Type of drink	How much you had to drink	SDs	Total
Tuesday	Beer	3 pints	6	16
	Whisky	2 nips	2	
	Beer	4 pints	8	
Wednesday	Lager	2 bottles	5	10
	Wine	5 glasses	5	
Thursday	Beer	2 pints	4	4
Total for week				30

To calculate what you have drunk at home during the last typical week, try to think how many measures were poured for each glass and add up the SDs.

When you have added up the SDs of alcohol during each day, enter the total in the right-hand column of the chart.

Now it is your turn.

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Day	Type of drink	How much you had to drink	SDs	Total
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				
Total for week				

Low-risk alcohol drinking advice



Reduce your long-term health risks by drinking no more than:

- 2 standard drinks a day for women and no more than 10 standard drinks a week
 - 3 standard drinks a day for men and no more than 15 standard drinks a week
- AND** at least two alcohol-free days every week.

Reduce your risk of injury on a single occasion of drinking by drinking no more than:

- 4 standard drinks for women on any single occasion
- 5 standard drinks for men on any single occasion

Stop drinking if you could be pregnant, are pregnant, or are trying to get pregnant.

There is no known safe level of alcohol use at any stage of pregnancy.

When not to drink

It's advisable not to drink if you:

- are **pregnant** or planning to get pregnant
- are on **medication** that interacts with alcohol
- have a **condition** that could be **made worse by drinking alcohol**
- feel unwell, **depressed**, tired or cold, as alcohol could make these things worse
- are about to **operate machinery or a vehicle** or do anything that is risky or **requires skill**.

If you are drinking more than this, you are at risk of developing alcohol-related problems and should cut down.

The drinking levels are lower for women than for men because women are affected more rapidly by alcohol. They generally have a lower body weight, a higher proportion of body fat and a lower rate of alcohol metabolism in the stomach, which leads to a higher blood alcohol level.

You may think these amounts are unrealistic because nearly everyone you know, including

yourself, drinks more than this. If you think this, both you and your friends are drinking too much.

Some people drink a lot more than others and your friends may be among them. Don't be surprised if people you know are drinking more than what is recommended. This is usual in our country.

If you are drinking within these ranges, this does not necessarily mean that your drinking is safe or that you should increase your drinking to the upper end of the range.

No level of drinking is without risk.

Young adults who have recently started drinking are less able to handle alcohol, and the upper end of the range may still be too much for them.

The consequences of exceeding the guidelines include:

- liver disease
- memory loss
- anxiety and depression
- family, relationship and work difficulties
- road crashes and violence.

PART 3

Okay, I'm over the limit – so what?

You've identified some reasons for drinking, and built up a picture of what is typical for you.

Read the statements below and circle **Yes** for the ones you agree with.

Quiz B

Everyone I know drinks more than those limits.	Yes	No
I don't believe that as little alcohol as that can harm people.	Yes	No
If I stopped doing everything that I'm told might harm me, I might as well curl up and die.	Yes	No
There wouldn't be any point in drinking as little as that.	Yes	No
I like having quite a few drinks.	Yes	No
I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I drank much less than I do now.	Yes	No
Life's too short for all this – eat, drink and be merry is what I believe.	Yes	No
I'll take the risk.	Yes	No

Consider each of the statements you agreed with.

You say	
Everyone I know drinks more than that.	Yes. But they might have problems you don't know about. Heavy drinkers tend to stick together. It's your life that's important.
I don't believe that as little alcohol as that can harm people.	You're right, it doesn't harm some people. But the more often you drink like that, or the more on any occasion, the more you are at risk.
If I stopped doing everything that I'm told might harm me, I might as well curl up and die.	Sure, but alcohol isn't like white bread or greasy chips – it's a drug. We have to treat it with respect by keeping within the limits.
There wouldn't be any point in drinking as little as that.	The more you drink, the more you need to get the same effect – your body becomes tolerant of alcohol. People who drink moderately get more effect from a small amount of alcohol.
I like having quite a few drinks.	Fine, that's up to you, but remember that your body becomes tolerant of alcohol. What about the costs of your drinking to your health, family, work and wallet?
I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I drank much less than I do now.	Yes, it's amazing how you get out of the habit of doing other things.

Life's too short for all this
– eat, drink and be merry
is what I believe.

If you want, you can do some or all of these and
make your life a bit longer. Heavy drinking shortens
your life and stops you enjoying it so much.

I'll take the risk.

Fine. Every time you walk down the road you
take a risk that you will be run over by a bus, but
that doesn't stop you going out. Safer drinking
or abstaining is about keeping the risk as low as
possible, like wearing a seat belt. Drinking too
much is a bit like overtaking on a blind corner. It's
a risk, and you might survive – some people do.
But you can reduce the risk by cutting down and
still enjoy drinking.

“Sometimes I want to change, sometimes I don’t.”

This is understandable. Most people who drink have said that to themselves at one time or another. Maybe it was during that heavy hangover, after a fight at a party, or after you remembered what you said to your friend at the party.

The reason you’re reading this booklet is possibly because you think about your drinking. Drinking has its downsides as well as its good things for you. The more the downsides balance out the good things, the more you will change your mind about whether you think your drinking is okay or not. The next section will help you think about whether your drinking is okay.

Part 4

What I want and what I do

Start by thinking about your life.

Answer the questions below carefully. Circle the answer that is correct for you.

Quiz C

1. Is your health important to you?

Yes

No

Now answer the following questions:

Have you ever had an accident or hurt yourself while drinking?

Yes

No

Have you ever had any illness, such as stomach pain or chronic diarrhoea, when you were drinking quite a lot?

Yes

No

Have you ever suffered from stress or depression during a time when you were drinking quite a lot?

Yes

No

Did you answer **Yes** to any of the questions above? If so, you might not be taking care of your health as you should...

2. Do you need alcohol to cope with life?

Yes

No

Now answer the following question:

Do you regularly drink more than the low-risk alcohol drinking advice recommends? (See page 8)

Yes

No

3. Would you hate to hurt people close to you?	Yes	No
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Now answer the following questions:

Have people close to you ever mentioned your drinking to you?	Yes	No
Have you ever had rows or difficulties with your friends as a result of drinking?	Yes	No
Have you ever felt ashamed or guilty about your drinking?	Yes	No
Have you ever woken up not remembering some of what you did or said while you were drinking?	Yes	No
Have you ever had bad arguments with your family during a spell when you were drinking quite a lot?	Yes	No

Did you answer **Yes** to any of the questions above? If so, you may be hurting those close to you without meaning to.

4. Do you enjoy having money to spend?	Yes	No
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Now answer the following question:

Have you ever spent more on alcohol than you intended?	Yes	No
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If you answered **Yes** to both of these, have you counted up how much you spend on alcohol each week?

5. Would you like to have enough money to provide for the needs of your family?	Yes	No
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Now answer the following question:

Have you missed any time from work because of a hangover, or because of lunchtime drinking?	Yes	No
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Did you answer **Yes** to both of these? Remember that heavy drinkers often have poor work records.

Part 5

Making the choices

In this part we would like you to compare the good things and the downsides of your drinking. Perhaps then you can decide whether or not the good things outweigh the downsides for you.

Here is an example:

John is a 32-year-old printer. He is divorced but lives with his girlfriend and they have a nine-month-old baby. He used to play football on Saturdays but has given it up in the past year. However, he still meets with his football mates on Friday and Saturday nights.

In the past six months things have been a bit strained at home. There have been rows about money, and also about John being out so much at night. John puts this down to the baby, who is unsettled and cries a lot. He tries to stay in more, but gets restless and irritable and bored. He used to enjoy making flies for his fly-fishing rod in the winter evenings, but since he stopped going fishing there hasn't seemed any point.

At work things are a bit shaky because of a near-empty order book and John is out of favour with his boss because he has been back late from the lunch break a few times in the afternoon after going to the pub. Recently he did a tally of his drinking at between four and 14 drinks every day (see Part 2, page 8).

Here's the chart that John filled out about the pluses and minuses of his drinking.

My present level of drinking

Good things	Downsides
Have a good laugh with the mates.	Arguments at home about the money I spend and the time I'm out.
Can forget the problems at home.	Short of money.
Meet people in the pub.	Sometimes feel rough in the mornings.
Keep in touch with the old crowd.	Can't settle at home properly without a drink.
Helps me relax after the problems at work.	Sometimes drive the car when I'm over the limit.
Makes me good company.	Maybe some problems at work.

Do the good things outweigh the downsides? Only John can answer that.

Let's now look at the good things and downsides of cutting down/ stopping – compared with not making any changes. This is what John filled in.

Cutting down or stopping

Good things	Downsides
Maybe reduce problems at home.	Won't be able to have a drink every night, so will find it hard to settle at home some nights.
Maybe improve relationships.	Will be at a loose end when I don't feel like fishing or fly-tying.
Give me more money and time for fishing and fly-tying.	My mates will think I'm a wuss.
Won't feel so rough in the morning.	I'll miss my drinks.

Only John can decide whether the good things outweigh the downsides.

The thing is that he's thinking about those things in his life that are important.

Drinking can be a way of life and you don't think about it. It's important for everyone who drinks to think consciously about it.

John did decide to change. But he did miss having 'a good drink' at first. It wasn't easy.

Can I do it?

This is the question John asked himself. It's not easy changing habits, but there are other booklets like this one that give practical tips on how to cut down or stop. The full list of the booklets in this series is on the inside front cover. If you have difficulty finding the one you need, contact Health Promotion, Health New Zealand – Te Whatu Ora (see the back cover for contact details).

But first do the exercise for yourself that John did.

Go back to page 13 and read your answers to quiz C. Write in the columns on the next page any question where you answered **Yes**. For instance, if you answered **Yes** to the question 'Have you ever had any illness, such as stomach pain or chronic diarrhoea, when you were drinking quite a lot?', 'stomach pains and diarrhoea' should be written under the downsides column. If you answered **Yes** to the question 'Do you regularly drink more than Health New Zealand recommends?', write 'risk of ill health in future' in the downsides column, and so on.

If you did not answer **Yes** to many questions in quiz C, think about any other downsides your drinking has for you.

My present level of drinking

Good things	Downsides
1. 	1.
2. 	2.
3. 	3.
4. 	4.
5. 	5.

Changing your drinking – cutting down or stopping

Now do the same exercise about the good things and downsides of changing your drinking – either cutting down or stopping.

Cutting down or stopping

Good things	Downsides
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

These questions are to help you think about the effects of your drinking. If you don't want to change, it's probably because you see more good things than downsides for continuing at your current levels.

Whatever your answer, think through the exercise carefully and decide whether you want to change your drinking.

If you do want to change, talk it over with someone you trust and obtain a copy of the appropriate booklet that will give you detailed advice. It can help.

“Will I have to give up completely if I decide to change?” Not necessarily.

You may be able to cut down, depending on how much you've been drinking. Or you may have to give up alcohol for a while. This depends on your health and on how dependent you are on alcohol. Even if you have to give up for a few months, you may be able to start drinking again, provided you can stay within the maximum limits. In John's example he cut down to around 16 SDs of alcohol per week.

There may be other reasons for changing your drinking. Here are three questions to ask yourself:

- 1. What problems do I have because of my drinking?**
- 2. What might happen if I don't reduce or stop my drinking?**
- 3. What kind of person (for example, mother, father, grandparent, husband, wife, partner, of value to others, self-respecting) do I want to be and is my drinking getting in the way?**

You might find it helpful to talk this over with an alcohol and drug practitioner.

But the main thing is that you decide what's right for you.

Health Promotion, Health New Zealand – Te Whatu Ora

Email: enquiries@hpa.org.nz

For help contact the Alcohol Drug Helpline on **0800 787 797**

To order resources visit resources.alcohol.org.nz