

Alcohol & you

A self help guide to sensible drinking

Shining a light on the future



You may be interested in this booklet if...

- You want to know more about alcohol use
- You are interested in what are current guidelines for safe limits
- You think you may have a problem with your drinking
- People have told you that you have a drink problem
- You are worried about someone else's drinking

What will this booklet do?

- Give you more information about different types of drinking
- Help you recognise your own pattern of drinking
- Help you decide what kind of drinker you are
- Describe how you might change if you want to
- Suggest how you might get further help

1. How do people use alcohol?

Most people in Britain drink alcohol. But different people use alcohol in different ways. These are some of the typical ways people use alcohol.

Which of these people are you most like, in the way you use alcohol?

Wayne enjoys a pint a couple of times a week. He tends to do this either with his mates at their local pub, in the evening, or at family celebrations such as birthday parties. He and his partner like to organise a baby sitter once in a while and treat themselves to a meal with wine at a restaurant. It is the company of his friends and family that Wayne enjoys. He's not that bothered about the alcohol, although he enjoys it when he does have a drink.

If you are like Wayne then probably you are what health guidelines call a Sensible Drinker. If you are otherwise in good health, then the alcohol you drink should cause you no harm. But you may still find this booklet helpful to you. You will be able to check that you really are a sensible drinker. It will also help you understand how and why you should continue to drink sensibly.

Gemma likes to go out with her friends about twice a week. She usually just has one or two drinks but sometimes finds she drinks a little more than this. This tends to happen when she drinks with her friends in rounds or during "happy hour" when the drinks are cheaper. She does

not feel she drinks too much. She accepts the occasional hangover without concern. Recently, she has started having a glass of wine at home most evenings.

If you are like Gemma then you might be surprised that you are what health guidelines call a Hazardous Drinker. This means that while you are unlikely to be actually causing harm to yourself right now, you are putting yourself at risk. Your drinking is hazardous because you are putting yourself at risk of having an accident or having serious health problems in the long run. A hazard is an accident waiting to happen! In fact, if you drink like Gemma, then probably there are days when you feel tired or hung-over because of the way you use alcohol. If you are a Hazardous Drinker, then using this booklet will help you return to being a Sensible Drinker. You will then avoid the long-term risks to your health that too much alcohol can cause.

John likes to have a drink on a regular basis. He goes to the pub most nights and has at least 3 to 4 pints. Recently he has been having arguments with his partner. She is not happy, both with the amount of time he spends in the pub and the amount of money he spends when he's in there. Also, recently, he has had to take time off work when he has been hung over the following day. He is now finding it difficult to fall asleep unless he has had a drink. He also finds he has to drink more to get the same effect he once had from smaller amounts. His partner thinks he has a problem and that it is getting worse, and it continues to be a source of arguments.

If you are like John then you could be damaging your health right now. Probably, you are drinking more alcohol than your body can cope with. If that is the case, then you are what health guidelines call a Harmful Drinker. You may not notice any effects at the moment, but over time your body will have more and more difficulty dealing with the alcohol you are drinking. Your health will suffer. It might even be, looking back to how you used to be when you drank less than you do now, that you do notice some differences. You may feel bloated or have 'tummy troubles'. Perhaps you don't feel as energetic as you used to. You may not sleep as well or wake feeling as rested. Possibly you feel less happy, even low in mood some days. If this sounds like you, then you should use this booklet to help you cut down both how much and how often you drink. You'll be surprised how much better you feel if you do.

Mary feels she needs to drink every day. If she does not have a drink she suffers from shaking, feeling sick, feeling anxious and sweating. She recently lost her job due to her drinking and can only afford to drink the cheapest brands. She drinks up to four litres of strong cider a day

and has tried to put her first drink of the day off for as long as possible but now finds it is getting earlier each day and is sometimes as soon as she gets up. She knows she is drinking too much and would like to change but feels afraid of the feelings she has when she tries to cut down. She knows she needs to talk to someone about his drinking and has thought of making an appointment to see her doctor.

If you are like Mary then you may find it difficult to stop drinking alcohol. You may begin to feel more unwell if you don't drink than if you do. If that is the case then you could be what health guidelines call a Dependent Drinker.

If you believe that you are dependent on alcohol then it is very important that you see your Doctor before you stop drinking.

Even if you are a Dependent Drinker, don't worry. There is help available. You can find out how to get the help from this booklet.

But let's not jump to conclusions! Before you finally decide what sort of drinker you think you are, read more of this booklet and do one or two of the exercises. Only then can you be clear what type of drinker you are. More importantly, you'll discover what you want to do about it and what you can do.

2. What is alcohol?

Before we go any further, let's be clear about what alcohol is. Alcohol itself is a colourless chemical. It can be made from almost anything that has sugar in it. For example, beer is made from barley, cider from apples, wine from grapes, whiskey from grain, and vodka from potatoes. Depending on what they are made from, and how they are made, different drinks have different amounts of alcohol in them. Beer and cider can be 2% to 7% alcohol; wines 9% to 15%; and spirits, like whiskey and vodka, are often 40% alcohol. These percentages are 'Alcohol By Volume'. On bottles you may see this shortened to 'ABV' next to the percentage number.

Alcohol is also measured in units. More and more drinks are labelled with the units if alcohol they have in them. Here are some examples of the typical number of units of alcohol in different drinks.



**Pint of
regular
Beer/
Lager/
Cider**



**Alcopop
or can
of Lager**



**Small
glass of
Wine**



**Single
Pub
measure
of Spirit**



**Bottle
of Wine**

Alcohol also contains calories. There are about 55 calories in every unit of pure alcohol. But remember, drinks have other ingredients besides alcohol and they will add to the calorie count! The table below shows roughly how many calories are in some popular drinks and mixes.

How many calories in ...?	Kcals	Measure
Beer and Lager		
Beer – canned and draught bitter	90	½ pint
Beer – Lager (ordinary 3-4% ABV)	80-85	½ pint
Beer – Lager (premium 5% ABV)	90	½ pint
Beer – Draught Mild bitter	70	½ pint
Beer – Brown ale	80	
Beer – Bottled Stout	105	
Cider – Dry	95	½ pint
Cider – Sweet	110	½ pint
Wine		
Dry white wine	85	125ml
Medium white wine	95	125ml
Sweet white wine	120	125ml

Sparkling white wine (Champagne, Cava)	95	125ml
Rose wine, medium	90	125ml
Red wine	85	125ml
Spirits	50 ml = pub double	
Whisky, gin, vodka etc	120	50ml
Premium whisky, gin, vodka	140	50ml
Liquers, brandy	150	50ml
Mixer		
Tonic water	40	100ml
Cola	45	100ml
Caffeine based energy drink	45	100ml
Can of (slimline/diet) Tonic, cola etc	0	100ml

What drinks do you usually have?

How much of it do you usually drink on days when you are drinking?

So how many units of alcohol do you usually have when you are drinking alcohol?

Alcohol stays longer in women's bodies than men's. So women should drink less alcohol than men.

If you are a woman, then you are increasing the risks to your health if you regularly drink 3 or more units a day. (If you are pregnant, you really shouldn't be drinking alcohol at all.)

If you are a man, then you are increasing the risks to your health if you regularly drink 4 or more units a day.

If you are drinking close to your limit, then two or three alcohol-free days a week will keep you safer.

3. What does alcohol do?

Alcohol dissolves quickly in the blood stream and is carried to all parts of the body, including the brain.

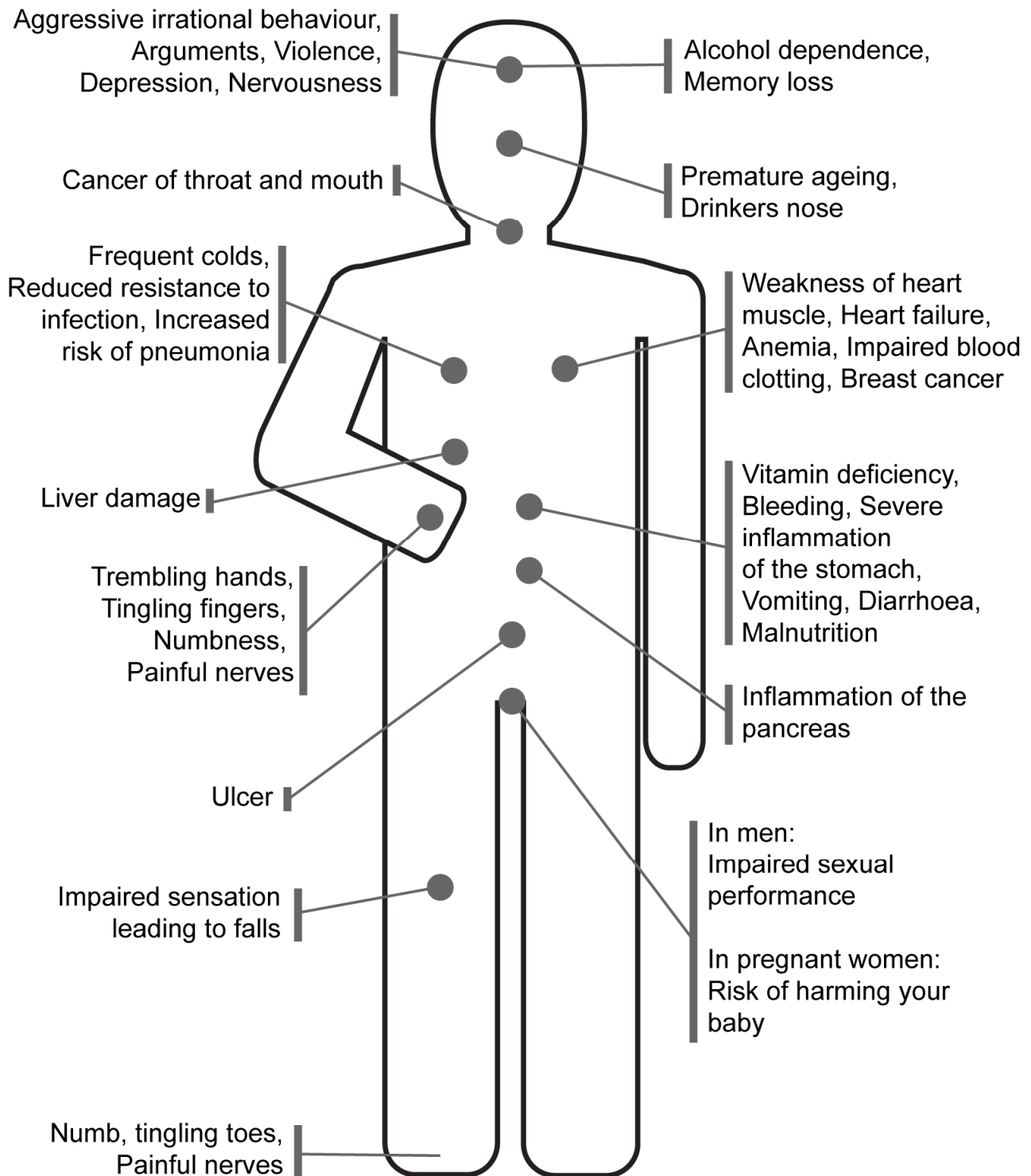
Alcohol depresses the nervous system. In small amounts it will make you feel relaxed.

As you drink larger amounts of alcohol, it will affect your judgement. You may do things you wouldn't do if you hadn't drunk alcohol, and some of these things you may later regret. It can cause unsteadiness and loss of balance, slurred speech, and blurred vision. It can even lead to unconsciousness and death.

The reason why you shouldn't drive or operate machinery after drinking alcohol is because it affects your judgement. It also affects your co-ordination – that is, your ability to control your body, and your reaction time slows down. It often does all this without you realising that it is affecting you in these ways.

Your body treats alcohol as a poison. It works hard to get rid of it. But it takes a healthy liver about one hour to get rid of 1 unit of alcohol. Fresh air, black coffee, and cold showers won't help to get alcohol out of your system.

Effects of alcohol misuse



Regularly drinking large amounts of alcohol increases the risk of serious illnesses. These include: inflammation of the pancreas; stomach ulcers; liver disease, including cancer; cancers of the mouth, throat and breast; and brain damage.

It can also cause (and will certainly make worse) any mental health problems, such as depression. Drinking large amounts of alcohol can also lead to personal and social problems.

4. What kind of drinker are you?

To find out what kind of drinker you are, think about the amount of alcohol you drink and also the pattern of your drinking. The pattern of your drinking is made up of the times when you drink alcohol and the times when you do not, and who you drink alcohol with.

Think about how you used alcohol in the last week. Now fill out the diary. Perhaps you cannot remember exactly what you had to drink last week, or when. In that case, keep a diary in the coming week. Each day, record on the sheet where, what, why and with whom you were drinking. In the small boxes, put the number of units consumed in the session.

Drinking Diary					
	AM PM Eve	Where and with whom/Alone	Type of drink	Units	£ spent
Mon					
Tue					
Wed					
Thurs					
Fri					
Sat					
Sun					
Total Units					

How much money did you spend on alcohol in the week?

When you have completed your Drinking Diary, use it to help you answer the following questions.

Questions	Scoring System					Your Score
	0	1	2	3	4	
How often do you have a drink that contains alcohol?	Never	Monthly or less	2-4 times per month	2-3 times per week	4+ times per week	
How many standard alcoholic drinks do you have on a typical day when you are drinking?	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	10+	
How often do you have one or more standard drinks on one occasion?	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily or almost daily	
How often in the last year have you found you were not able to stop drinking once you had started?	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily or almost daily	
How often in the last year have you failed to do what was expected of you because of drinking?	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily or almost daily	
How often in the last year have you needed an alcoholic drink in the morning to get you going?	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily or almost daily	

How often in the last year have you had a feeling of guilt or regret after drinking?	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily or almost daily	
How often in the last year have you not been able to remember what happened when drinking the night before?	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily or almost daily	
Have you or someone else been injured as a result of your drinking?	No		Yes, but not in the last year		Yes, during the last year	
Has a relative/friend/doctor/health worker been concerned about your drinking or advised you to cut down?	No		Yes, but not in the last year		Yes, during the last year	
Add up the numbers in the right-hand column. What is the Total?						

If you scored **up to 7**, probably you are drinking sensibly.

If you scored between **8 and 15**, then your drinking is probably hazardous. You are putting your health at risk.

If you scored between **16 and 19**, then your drinking is probably harmful. Although you may not notice it, your health is suffering because of the alcohol.

If you are scoring **20 or more**, then you might be alcohol dependent.

Now put the information together that you have learned about yourself.

My drinking is probably:

- Sensible
- Hazardous
- Harmful
- Dependent

My drinking follows this pattern:

Days I Drink	How much I drink		
	Mornings	Afternoons	Evenings
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			
Sat			
Sun			
What I generally spend on alcohol each week is £			

After score

You should find some of the things in the following pages helpful in controlling your drinking of alcohol. You should aim to reduce your drinking gradually.

If you are a harmful drinker or a hazardous drinker then you should find help in the following pages.

If you believe that you are a **dependent drinker** on alcohol then it is very important that you see your Doctor before you stop drinking.

5. Why do you drink alcohol?

To get the most out of the help in the following pages, record all the reasons why you drink alcohol. Some common reasons why people drink alcohol are listed below. You may drink for reasons of your own. You should add any of your own reasons at the end of the list.

Why I Drink Alcohol	Yes/No
Because my friends do!	
Because it helps me relax.	
Because it helps me sleep at night.	
Because it helps me stay calm when I'm mixing socially.	
Because I get bored – it's something to do.	
Because I feel anxious if I go without alcohol.	
Because I feel low in mood.	
Because I like the feeling of being drunk!	
Because it helps me to forget some things in my life that cause me stress and make me unhappy e.g. debts; a difficult personal relationship; problems at work.	
Other reasons	

Now think about what might be good about stopping drinking alcohol or cutting down on the amount you do drink. Some of the advantages of drinking less, or not at all are listed below. But you can add other good things of your own. In the right-hand column, number the top three advantages for you of cutting down or even stopping your drinking. These will be your top three reasons for reducing or stopping your drinking.

Advantages of stopping or reducing alcohol	My top 3 Reasons
I'll have more cash to spend on other things!	
I'll lose weight.	
I'll sleep better at night.	
I'll wake-up in a morning feeling refreshed.	
I'll feel happier and my mood will improve.	
I'll feel more in control.	
I'll look and feel healthier and fitter.	
I'll get on better with my family and friends.	
I'll become much more relaxed.	

6. What do you want to do?

You now understand a lot about your drinking. You know how much you drink. You know when you drink. You know why you drink. You also know what you will gain by reducing or stopping your drinking.

Do you want continue drinking alcohol, but less of it and less frequently?

Or do you want to stop drinking alcohol altogether?

Think about the consequences of continuing drinking in the way you do now. What is good and what is bad about that? How would you see your life in six months time?

If I continue to use alcohol like I do now

Advantages
What's good about drinking?

Disadvantages
What's bad about drinking?

How I see myself and my life in six months' time if I continue drinking

Now think about reducing or stopping drinking. What will be good and bad about that? How would you expect your life to be in six months time if you reduced your drinking or stopped altogether?

If I reduce or stop my use of alcohol

Advantages

What's good about drinking less or not drinking at all?

Disadvantages.

What's bad about drinking less or not drinking at all?

How I see myself and my life in six months' time if I reduce or stop my drinking?

Now come to a clear and honest conclusion about yourself and your drinking, and what you want to do about your drinking.

I am a

- safe drinker
- hazardous drinker
- harmful drinker
- dependent drinker

I want to

- carry on
- cut down
- stop

Remember:

If you believe that you are a dependent drinker on alcohol, then it is very important that you see your Doctor before you stop drinking.

7. How can you control your drinking?

The way you drink alcohol now is in part a habit. It is a habit that took time to develop. Now you should take time to make new habits in the way you use alcohol.

Planning

Begin to take control of your drinking by planning when and how much you will drink.

- Use your Drinking Diary to plan when you will drink alcohol and how much you will drink.
- Identify high-risk times i.e. times when you know that you might drink too much e.g. on a night out with friends, at home after a hard day, on Friday or Saturday nights.
- Pick at least two days a week when you will not drink any alcohol.
- On days when you plan to drink, pick the time when you will stop drinking and leave the pub or bar, or the time when you will go to bed.
- On the days when you plan to drink alcohol, write down what types of drinks you will have and how many. (Try to work out how many units of alcohol you will drink.)
- Keep track of how much you really drink by recording what you actually had next to what you planned to have.
- Plan to eat before you start drinking, and if possible eat while you are drinking. This can help to reduce the effect of alcohol on your body.

Trimming

Begin to reduce the amount of alcohol you actual drink by trimming back at the times you'll least miss it.

- If you go out to drink, don't have a drink at home beforehand.
- Try to eat before drinking alcohol. You will probably drink less if you are full.
- Start drinking later in the evening, whether you drink at home or go out to drink; set a time before which you won't have an alcoholic drink.
- If you drink spirits, dilute them with a mixer (tonic, soda, ginger ale, lemonade etc) and increase the amounts of the mixer to make them 'long drinks'.
- If you drink wine, buy small glasses rather than large ones and try 'spritzers' (mixing your wine with tonic or lemonade). Try to drink lower strength wines.
- If you drink beer or lager, stick to standard strength and avoid extra-strength varieties or premium varieties.

Alternatives

Begin to reduce the time you spend drinking alcohol by looking for alternatives.

- Pick one day a week when you usually drink alcohol and do something else instead e.g. go to the cinema, go swimming or some other activity.
- If you tend to drink alcohol at home, experiment with non-alcoholic drinks until you find one that you enjoy. These may be cold soft drinks such as fizzy drinks, cordials or fruit juices. Or they may be hot drinks such as tea, coffee, hot chocolate, cocoa, or malted drinks.
- If you tend to drink alcohol when you are out with friends, offer to be the non-drinking driver so you have a good excuse ready for not drinking alcohol.
- If you are drinking alcohol, alternate your alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic drinks. Remember many pubs now sell tea and coffee.

Particular problems

I am not drinking alcohol and ...

I feel anxious

Remember:

Try relaxation or yoga. Practise slow, deep breathing. Use calming thoughts, ignore anxious thoughts, and make a plan of your time to keep busy. Distract yourself.

I can't sleep

Remember:

Exercise regularly - but not late in the evening! Go to bed and get up at a regular time. Make sure your bed and bedroom are comfortable. Have a bedtime routine and wind down before going to bed. Your sleep will improve once you reduce your alcohol intake and follow these tips.

I'm bored

Remember:

Plan your day out so that you have something to look forward to. Use the money you are saving on alcohol for something special. Get in touch with supportive friends who won't try to get you to drink. Look for a new hobby or interest. Get on with some jobs that you have not got round to.

I'm stressed out and can't relax

Remember:

Relaxation and leisure time each day is important. Plan your time and do one thing at a time. Eat a balanced diet. Talk things over with a friend or family member. Set priorities and don't be afraid to say no.

I'm out with friends but don't feel part of the crowd

Remember:

Try not focus on yourself. Think about those around you. Ask what is going on in their lives, and listen to what is being said. You do not need to keep up drinking with friends who are heavy drinkers; that's their choice and not yours. People will not dislike you just because you are not drinking as much.

For more help with any of these difficulties have a look at the other booklets in this series: Stress and Anxiety, Sleep Problems, Coping with Depression, Shyness and Social Anxiety, Stress. (Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS FoundationTrust)

8. What is Dependent Use of Alcohol?

There are some things that everybody should know about very heavy drinking.

Continuous heavy drinking

Many people who drink very heavily every day do not eat properly. In particular, they do not get enough Vitamin B. At the same time, the body needs extra Vitamin B to repair the damage caused by alcohol. It particularly needs Vitamin B to repair damage to nerve cells in the body, including the brain. Very heavy drinking flushes Vitamins out of the body. So the very heavy drinker needs more Vitamin B than most people but usually gets less. This leads to nerve damage. Many very heavy drinkers first experience damage to their nerves as 'pins and needles' in their fingers and toes.

Very heavy drinkers may also experience being breathless when doing ordinary activities, like walking upstairs. They may feel constantly tired. And they may find that they bruise very easily. This is because the alcohol is damaging the blood cells that carry oxygen and other blood cells that help stop bleeding.

Very heavy drinkers may also get Diabetes because of damage to their pancreas, which normally produces insulin. They may also damage their liver, but they are unlikely to actually feel that damage being done.

If you experience any of these symptoms it is important you discuss this with your GP.

Suddenly stopping very heavy drinking

The body, and especially the brain, will adjust to cope with large amounts of alcohol if the alcohol is present in the body all the time. That means that the body, and especially the brain, has to readjust if the alcohol is taken away.

If your body has adjusted to coping with continuous large amounts of alcohol and then the alcohol is suddenly stopped then you may experience the following:

- Shaking or tremors all over.
- Very heavy sweating.
- Extremely high blood pressure, and looking very red in the face.
- Vomiting and diarrhoea, and the only way to keep down any food will be after drinking more alcohol.
- Very tense and agitated, being unable to settle down or do anything.
- Feeling very confused, not knowing the time, or where you are and having a very poor short-term memory so that you cannot recall what happened recently.
- Hallucinating: you may just 'sense' that bad things are happening, or you may actually see or hear things that aren't there; typically, people in this state 'see' spiders, rats or snakes.
- You may suffer 'fits', during which you lose control of your body, collapse, and become unconscious.

These are symptoms of physical withdrawal from alcohol. The symptoms are very dangerous. They can be fatal. They can also lead to permanent brain damage. The very heavy drinker can be left with no ability to lay down new memories. It is a type of dementia specifically associated with very heavy drinking. It is caused by a lack of Thiamine, which is a type of Vitamin B needed by the brain to make new memories.

Remember: if you believe that you are dependent on alcohol, then it is very important that you see your Doctor before you stop drinking. However with the right kind of help, anybody can come off alcohol safely!

9. What about setbacks?

You might not have any set-backs! But if you do have a set-back it is important not to give up on the goals you have set yourself.

A set-back can also be a good thing. It can be something you can learn from. So if you do have a set-back, think about it afterwards. Was it a difficult situation you found yourself in? Was it something you were thinking about that caused you to feel bad or feel over-confident? What was it that caused you to have the set-back?

Write it down, and plan how you will deal with that situation, thought, or feeling next time. That way, you can try to avoid similar set-backs in the future.

Set-backs are a normal part of life. Remember that living life with much less alcohol than you used to use, or even without any alcohol at all, involves learning new habits. So for a time it's easy to slip back into old habits. If you slip back remember the goals you set yourself for your drinking and try again. Read through this booklet again to remind yourself. Given time, your new ways of behaving will become old, settled habits themselves.

In moments of doubt just answer this question:

Do you want to control alcohol or do you want alcohol to control you?

Useful Contacts

- **Alcoholic Concern**

A national agency on alcohol misuse. It works to reduce alcohol-related harm and to increase the range and quality of services available to people with alcohol-related problems.

How's your drink: www.howsyourdrink.org.uk

Website: www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

- **Alcoholics Anonymous**
Information, advice and support to help people recover from alcoholism.
Helpline: 0845 769 7555 (local rate)
Website: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

- **AL-ANON Family Groups UK and Eire**
Helps families and friends of alcoholics recover from the effects of living with those with drinking problems.
Tel: 020 7403 0888 (24-hour helpline) Email: alanonuk@aol.com
Website: www.al-anonuk.org.uk

- **British Liver Trust**
Support for adults with liver disease.
Tel: 0870 770 8028
Email: info@britishlivertrust.org.uk
Website: www.britishlivertrust.org.uk

- **Drinkline - The National Alcohol Helpline**
Helpline: 0800 917 8282

- **National Association for Children of Alcoholics**
Addresses the problems faced by children growing up in families where one or both parents are alcoholics or have a similar addictive problem.
Helpline: 0800 358 3456
Website: www.nacoa.org.uk

- **Frank – Alcohol / Drug Information for young people**
FRANK is NOT a person but a way for you to get straight up advice and info about drugs. It's the facts without the attitude.
Tel: 0800 77 66 00
Website: www.talktofrank.com/

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