

Care first



COVID-19: Managing Alcohol intake during Lockdown

The global COVID-19 pandemic has raised questions about what coping measures people are using during the lockdown. Not only are our social lives significantly limited, we are all living through uncertain and anxious times, which had prompted speculation and commentary about whether people are drinking more alcohol as a result of the lockdown?

Latest Research:

New research commissioned by charity Alcohol Change UK which has found that more than one in five (21%) adults who drink alcohol are drinking more often since lockdown began on 23 March. But one in three of those who drink (35%) have reduced how often they drink or stopped drinking altogether.

The representative survey of more than 2,000 people suggests that lockdown is changing the way that the UK drinks at both ends of the scale, with 6% of people surveyed (who have previously drunk alcohol) choosing to abstain from alcohol entirely for the lockdown.

These figures suggest that 8.6 million adults in the UK are drinking more frequently since lockdown, while 14 million are drinking less often or have stopped drinking entirely.

Habits are formed quickly but can be hard to break. If people start drinking at risky levels now, not only do they face the risk of immediate harms which can include; accidents, fires and increased tensions in households leading to arguments and conflict, but also the risk of their alcohol consumption rising over the medium to long term. Alcohol's effects on mental health are particularly concerning during lockdown, when many of us are already under a great deal of stress.

How Alcohol Affects Mental Health:

Alcohol is sometimes used by people to manage symptoms of anxiety and depression, but excessive drinking is likely to make those symptoms worse. Alcohol can be considered as a coping mechanism for some individuals who drink to help manage stress, anxiety, depression or other mental health issues. Unfortunately, although alcohol can help us relax and give us a brief feeling of euphoria, the effects are short-lived and the long-term negative consequences of using alcohol in this way can be quite harmful:

- Overuse of alcohol can worsen the symptoms of many mental health problems. In particular, it can lead to low mood and anxiety
 - As the immediate feeling of calm after drinking fades over time, we may feel worse than before
 - Post-drinking hangovers can be particularly difficult, with the usual headache and nausea being accompanied by feelings of depression and/or anxiety
 - Using alcohol in this way can mean that the underlying mental health issues aren't addressed

If individuals come to rely on alcohol to manage their mental health issues, that reliance can itself become a problem. Individuals may find that their drinking starts to get in the way of other activities and puts a strain on relationships, home life and work – both things that can undermine our mental wellbeing.

Sensible Drinking and Knowing your Limits:

Many of us enjoy a drink, usually when socialising, but lately we may be finding ourselves drinking more at home. Whilst infrequent drinking shouldn't do you too much harm, regularly overdoing it is associated with various health risks, so it's important to know how to enjoy alcohol in moderation.

Sensible drinking means knowing what your limits are and being aware of how much you're drinking. Simply put, sensible drinking means not drinking alcohol to excess.

Excessive alcohol use means the liver becomes overloaded and cannot deal with the amount of alcohol in the bloodstream quickly enough to stop it affecting the rest of the body.

Alcohol can make us feel happy, light-headed and talkative, but at the same time it is also damaging to our bodies. If you drink heavily, you have an increased risk of developing a range of health conditions including inflammation and cirrhosis of the liver, some cancers, high blood pressure, stomach disorders, obesity, and as we've mentioned - mental health problems.

How much is too much?

Knowing your units will help you stay in control of your drinking. To keep health risks from alcohol to a low level if you drink most weeks:

- Men and Women are advised not to drink more than 14 units a week on a regular basis
- Spread your drinking over 3 or more days if you regularly drink as much as 14 units a week
- If you want to cut down, try to have several alcohol-free days each week
- Pregnant women are advised not to drink alcohol at all.
- Fourteen units is equivalent to 6 pints of average-strength beer or 10 small glasses of low-strength wine.

Tips for cutting down:

- Consider drinking low-alcohol beers, or at least do not drink strong beers or lagers.
- Try pacing the rate of drinking. Perhaps alternate soft drinks with alcoholic drinks.
- If you eat when you drink, you may drink less.
- Don't stock up on alcohol - having alcohol at home may make it more likely that you'll have a drink. Try only buying alcohol when you plan to drink it.
- It may be worth reviewing your entire social routine when the lockdown is lifted. For example, consider:
 - cutting back on types of social activity which would usually involve you drinking.
 - trying different social activities where drinking is not involved.
 - reducing the number of days in the week where you go out to drink.
 - going out to pubs or clubs later in the evening.
- Try to resist any pressure from people who may encourage you to drink more than you really want to.

Have more Drink Free Days:

'Drink Free Days' is a campaign launched by the UK alcohol charity, Drinkaware. Cutting down the number of days a week we drink is an easy way to have less and feel better. Having more Drink Free Days each week has many health benefits, such as:

- lower blood pressure
- reduced risk of cancer and heart and liver disease
- weight loss
- better sleep
- improved mental health
- healthier appearance
- increased energy
- save money

Useful Links for more Information:

<https://alcoholchange.org.uk/blog/2020/covid19-drinking-during-lockdown-headline-findings>

<https://alcoholchange.org.uk/alcohol-facts/fact-sheets/alcohol-and-mental-health>

www.carefirst-lifestyle.co.uk

www.drinkaware.co.uk

<https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/understand-your-drinking/unit-calculator>

www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

www.nhs.uk

If you feel you may need some support, you can also contact Care first. Care first is a leading provider of confidential, professional counselling, information and advice services. All employees are eligible to use Care first, our services include; telephone counselling, information services and online support. Call Care first on the Freephone number provided by your organisation and you can speak to a professional in confidence.

