

Alcohol harm reduction advice

If the person wants to cut down

For lower risk drinkers (not alcohol dependent) the advice is to reduce gradually, keep a drinks diary, have alcohol-free days (where safe to do so), switch to lower-strength drinks, and seek specialist advice if signs of dependence are present.

It is advised that all alcohol reductions in individuals that drink at high risk or dependent levels should involve specialist treatment input (such as the local CGL treatment service).

Only if an individual chooses not to seek medical intervention should the below reduction advice be followed.

Individuals should seek immediate medical support if they experience adverse symptoms such as

- A seizure
- Confusion or hallucinations (seeing or hearing things others can't)
- Double vision or trouble staying balanced.

Physical dependence on alcohol

Stopping alcohol abruptly can be dangerous if an individual is drinking heavily and or is alcohol dependent.

When people drink alcohol daily their body will adjust to the amount they are drinking. This means that they become tolerant to alcohol but also often experience withdrawal symptoms when they try to stop. This generally happens when people are drinking more than 10 units a day.

Common withdrawal symptoms are:

- Tremors (the shakes)
- Increased pulse rate
- Anxiety
- Insomnia (difficulty sleeping)
- Seizures (fits)
- Sweating
- Loss of appetite or nausea
- Agitation
- Delirium (confusion)
- Hallucinations

Alcohol withdrawal can be medically dangerous and life threatening. This is due to the risk of seizures and severe confusion (delirium tremens).

Please follow the below guidance on cutting down safely.

Units

Knowing the number of units that are being consumed is important as it is helpful in planning a safe reduction. The number of units is on the side of bottles or cans.

You can also calculate units by measuring the amount of alcohol being drunk each day and multiplying the amount in litres by the percentage alcohol content.

Volume (ml) x ABV (%) ÷ 1000 = units

For example:

3 litres of 7.5% cider

$3000 \times 7.5 \div 1000 = 22.5$ units per day

or

1 bottle (70cl) of 40% vodka

$700 \times 40 \div 1000 = 28$ units per day

Rate of reduction

The rate of reduction should be individualised. Most people can reduce by 2-3 units every few days with an overall reduction time of around two weeks. Alcohol would still need to be consumed evenly throughout the day.

The person drinking should normally start at the amount they have been drinking previously which gives no withdrawal symptoms. The aim is for a “soft landing”, the important thing is to reduce at a pace that is manageable for the individual. Better to make a bit of progress rather than go too fast, find it hard and then give up.

The aim is to avoid severe and dangerous withdrawal symptoms, which may lead to serious health problems. Most people are able to stop when they have reached 4-6 units per day.

If an individual develops more severe withdrawals (fits, hallucinations and confusion) they need to seek **urgent medical advice**.

Medical advice is available through a GP or from 111. It is important that the person addressing their drinking is supported, and the “support person” has permission to seek urgent advice on their behalf.

Tips for cutting down safely

Advice for the individual cutting down:

- If possible, ensure support is available from your family, friends or a professional.
- Consider letting your friends know when you are making changes
- Ensure you have calculated your daily number of units and are confident about the quantity you are drinking so you know the baseline you should be reducing from.
- Plan a reduction diary (see the next pages) to know how much you should be drinking each day.

Whilst reducing:

- Consider buying the amount of alcohol you need daily and placing it out in the morning so you know how much you have left. Ensure, in case you need it, that there is something left for the next morning or overnight.
- Spread the alcohol over the day (and, if needed, the night) rather than drinking quickly.
- Change to lower strength drinks or dilute high strength drinks with a mixer to make them last longer.
- Consider changing your normal drink to something which you don't normally have but keeping the number of units the same.
- Avoid high risk situations or social situations where your alcohol consumption might increase or get out of control.
- Keep a note of your daily intake. Use a measuring cup if you have one, or use the same size glass to help keep track.
- Be honest with yourself and other people.

After stopping:

- Where physical dependence has been present most people find that if they try to drink a lower amount it is unsuccessful. For this reason, it is recommended to have abstinence after stopping dependent drinking.
- One thing that may take time to improve is your sleep. Sleep depends on routine and improves with practice. Sleeping tablets are rarely helpful and best avoided.

Sometimes, as the brain adjusts to coming off alcohol people experience mood swings, irritability, urges and cravings, fatigue and anxiety. These symptoms will pass but should they continue to be a problem, please discuss with your GP.

Thiamine

When on an alcohol reduction plan, it is advisable to take Thiamine (Vitamin B1) which reduces the risk of developing Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome and other neurological consequences.

This can be obtained from a GP or health food shops.

Diary planning

A drink diary can be used to plan your decrease so you know how much you should be having each day.

Date	Number of units	Quantity of alcohol

Support services

Local treatment services

CGL Cambridgeshire

www.changegrowlive.org

Phone: 0300 555 0101

Email: cambridgeshirereferrals@cgl.org.uk

CGL Aspire (Peterborough)

www.changegrowlive.org

Phone: 01733 895624 | Freephone: 0800 111 4354

Email: peterborough@cgl.org.uk

Online support for alcohol

Breaking Free: www.breakingfreeonline.com (access code: contact 11)

Alcohol Change UK: <https://alcoholchange.org.uk>

Reddit “stop drinking”: www.reddit.com/r/stopdrinking

Sober Recovery: www.soberrecovery.com/forums

National organisations

These organisations are provided by people who have lived experience of alcohol issues.

Alcoholics Anonymous: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk | 0800 917 7650 | Daily local online and face-to-face meetings can be found by searching “Fenland AA”

Smart Recovery: www.smartrecovery.org.uk | 0300 053 6022

For families and carers

Alcohol Change UK: <https://alcoholchange.org.uk>

Al-Anon: www.al-anonuk.org.uk

National Association for Children of Alcoholics: <https://nacoa.org.uk>