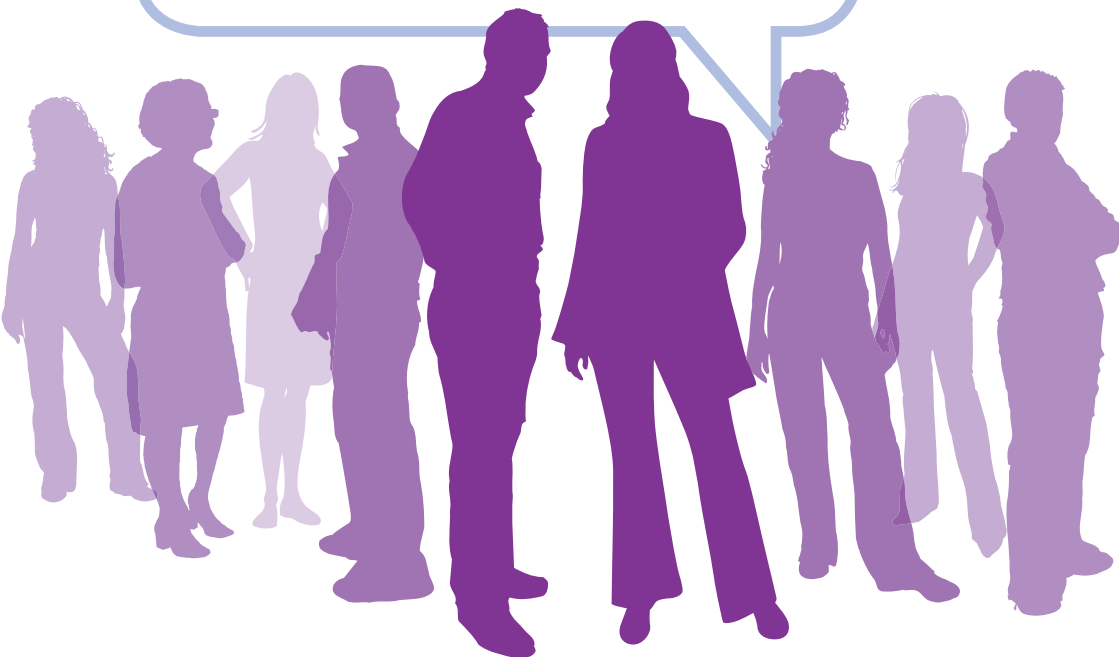


cutting down
your **drinking**
a step-by-step guide



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We drink alcohol when we are out and we drink when we are at home. Alcohol is so much a part of our lives that we don't think twice about it until it has already become a problem. Most people don't realise they are drinking too much and aren't worried about their drinking. This book is for people who have realised that their drinking is, or might become, a problem and want to cut down.

Perhaps the amount you drink is affecting your health, or maybe your friends or loved ones have asked you to cut down because they are worried about you. You could already have problems in your relationships caused by your drinking, or perhaps you are worried that if you go on the way you are, you will start to lose friends or even your partner.

Whatever the reason for drinking less, this book, along with support, will help you gain control over the amount you drink.

Health professionals, such as doctors and nurses, understand the harm of drinking too much alcohol and may ask you about your drinking habits. It might have been a health professional who gave you this book.

Drinking more than your body can cope with is bad for you. The truth is that drinking as little as two cans of lager (5% abv) a day causes damage to your physical and mental health in the short- and long-term. Drinking too much costs us money, can get us into trouble with the law, affects our families and gradually damages our communities and our economy.

- In Scotland, 50% of men and 39% of women exceeded either the daily or the weekly guidelines on alcohol consumption, or both, in 2008/9.
- Alcohol is nearly 70% more affordable now than in 1980.
- People drinking too much alcohol costs Scotland around £3.5 billion a year.

Drinking too much can affect:

- money
- social life
- law
- family
- health – mental and physical
- work.

Although your drinking can impact on others around you, such as your family and friends, **you** are the one person who can gain control of your drinking before it gains control of you.

Taking control of your drinking means trusting yourself that you can make a change. Even a small change is a good start.

And don't be disheartened if you have some slips and setbacks along the way; any reduction in your drinking will be a step in the right direction.

On the plus side, you'll notice some of the benefits of reducing your drinking straight away!

did you know?

Scotland has the eighth highest level of alcohol consumption in the world.



Cutting down or cutting out?

You might think that cutting down your drinking isn't achievable, and that you would prefer to cut out alcohol altogether. If you would prefer to stop drinking, or would like to talk through what the benefits of this would be, contact your doctor or local alcohol services for support. If your body is dependent on alcohol, you can suffer a severe reaction (such as a seizure/fit) if you stop drinking suddenly. You are always better to cut down gradually rather than stop suddenly.

If you feel your drinking is already causing you harm, such as having withdrawal symptoms like 'the shakes' if you do not drink, or if you feel you rely on alcohol to get by, then you should seek support.

Visit the following website for advice:

www.nhsinform.co.uk/support-services/topics/a/alcohol.aspx

When you start to cut down your drinking you might notice that:

- you sleep better and have more energy during the day
- you look better – your eyes and skin seem brighter, you start to lose weight
- you can concentrate better
- you feel less anxious, less stressed out, less down and depressed
- headaches and upset stomachs happen less often
- you save money.

Alcohol has been attributed to 1 in 20 deaths in Scotland.

72% of women and 71% of men who are drinkers are more likely to drink at home than in pubs, clubs, restaurants, etc.

Cutting down the amount you drink is not easy, but with support, you can do it slowly and steadily.

you will enjoy life with your family and friends more

How to explore your relationship with alcohol

This book will help to support you as you think about why you drink, and help you to understand how alcohol affects you.

It gives you information on how much is too much and, once you are ready, it will help you to cut down to a level less likely to cause you and other people harm.

Most important is getting the support you need in doing this – you can either work through the book on your own or with the help of a practitioner such as your doctor, nurse, alcohol support worker, counsellor, or any other person that you might talk to about your drinking. We also let you know where you can go for more help.

It has been estimated that 65,000 children may be affected by parental alcohol misuse in Scotland.

This book includes a diary so you can write down your progress, as well as keep track of the steps you are making over 12 weeks. Following the first 12 weeks, there is also a pocket diary for you to keep with you to track your continuing progress. And there are hints and tips on how to stay in control of how much you drink.

There are also some real-life stories at the back of the book.

These are here to inspire you and to show you that, even in very difficult situations, it is possible to overcome a problem with alcohol.

In Scotland in 2007, 85% of deaths from chronic liver disease were due to excessive alcohol consumption.

stages of change

stage 1: thinking



If you are at the thinking stage, you may be anxious about your use of alcohol but haven't yet decided to make a change in the way you drink. You may have been at this thinking stage for a while – maybe even years – going over the good things and the not-so-good things about the way you drink.

stage 2: preparing

Preparing to change means thinking about the way you are going to manage – who will help, which drinking situations might be most difficult to change, and so on. This is a really important stage as the more you think through how you will cope, the more likely you are to do so.

stage 3: changing

At this stage you will be starting to make some changes to your drinking.

stage 4: being motivated

Being motivated to keep your changes going. Coping with slips or setbacks and getting back on track.

stage 5: staying changed

Recognise how well you are doing; you are taking control and can enjoy the benefits of drinking less.

In Scotland, about 50% of men and 39% of women are drinking more than their daily or weekly recommended sensible amounts. If you drink at all, you are affected by alcohol. But what does drinking 'a little' mean? How can you tell how much you are drinking and whether or not you are beginning to rely on alcohol?

What is a unit?

1 unit is equal to 10 ml of pure alcohol. The number of units of alcohol in a drink depends on the size and strength of the drink.



Drinking guidelines

The UK Department of Health has set recommended sensible drinking guidelines based on medical and scientific evidence of the short- and long-term effects of alcohol.



no more
than 2–3 units
per day



no more
than 3–4 units
per day

Women should not regularly drink more than 2–3 units per day and no more than 14 units per week.

Men should not drink more than 3–4 units per day and no more than 21 units per week.

Everyone should have at least two alcohol-free days per week.

Pregnant women or women trying to conceive should avoid drinking alcohol. There is no 'safe' time for drinking alcohol during pregnancy and there is no 'safe' amount. Drinking no alcohol during pregnancy is the best and safest choice.

How does alcohol affect me?

There is a whole range of physical and mental health problems, as well as social problems, associated with drinking more than your body can cope with.



Alcohol and behaviour

Not many people realise that alcohol is a drug – it is a depressant – which means it slows down the workings of the brain.

Depressant drugs make you feel more confident and relaxed to start with, but they also affect your ability to carry out tasks requiring coordination, like cooking.

Like other drugs, alcohol is a poison if taken in large doses. It can even kill you, knocking out the part of the brain which controls breathing.

Alcohol will affect your judgement and can make you aggressive and argumentative. It can impact on your mental health too, increasing the likelihood of depression, anxiety and memory loss, and can make existing mental health problems worse.

One in three divorces in the UK states that a partner drinking too much played a part in the marriage breaking down.

50% of prisoners in Scottish prisons report being drunk at the time of their offence.

How your body responds

After being swallowed, alcohol travels to the stomach where about one fifth is absorbed into the bloodstream. Just minutes after you drink, there will be alcohol in every part of your body.

After one or two drinks you may feel more chatty and your heart rate will speed up a little. You might feel warmer – because of alcohol in the blood making blood vessels expand. A couple more drinks and you start to feel light-headed. Coordination and reaction times are slowed down, along with the ability to make decisions. This is caused by alcohol acting on nerve cells around your body, making them work more slowly.

Carry on drinking and you will start to slur your words; your vision will be blurry. Your liver will start to get seriously overloaded. Keep drinking more and you might start to stagger about.

As you continue to drink, you will be much more likely to have an accident, or get into an argument or fight. As your body tries to get rid of the alcohol, you will need to go to the toilet a lot more than usual and will become dehydrated – this is what causes a hangover the next day. You might also get an upset stomach and be sick.

If you drink enough to become unconscious, you could be sick and choke on your vomit.

If you drink on an empty stomach, alcohol travels around your body more quickly. If you have had a meal it will be absorbed more slowly.

The amount of alcohol in your bloodstream also depends on a number of other things:

- your weight
- your gender
- the length of time spent drinking
- whether or not you eat food with the alcohol.

Less than one-tenth of the alcohol you take in passes out of the body through urine and breath. Most of it has to be burnt up by the body, which takes place in the liver. This is why your liver will suffer if you drink too much.

Your body deals with alcohol slowly, so it will stay in your system long after you have finished drinking.

Drinking too much can cause serious conditions, some of which can be fatal. Drinking large amounts of alcohol at one time could lead to coma and even death.

In Scotland in 2009, there were 1282 deaths related to alcohol – 100% higher than thirty years ago.

Drinking and calories

Four pints of beer (5% abv) equals approximately 1000 calories. And the calories you do get from alcohol are of negligible nutritional value to your body.

To give you an idea of what this means, there are 240 calories in a fruit and nut bar of chocolate, or one jam doughnut or a slice of pizza, and there are 130 calories in a bag of crisps. There are as many calories in a pint of beer as there are in a chocolate eclair!

did you know?

Alcohol can have more calories than many foods and, of course, many alcoholic drinks often contain extra calories from added sugar too.



1 pint of
lager
(5% abv)

**244
calories**



1 pint of
medium
cider
(5% abv)

**240
calories**



1 glass of
wine (175 ml)
(12.5% abv)

**130
calories**



1 measure
of gin,
with tonic
(37.5% abv)

**126
calories**



1 alcopop
(5% abv)

**200
calories**

Tolerance to alcohol

You might be thinking that you can handle your drink better than other people. If you can, this might actually mean you have become tolerant to alcohol.

Tolerance to a drug means that, because of heavy use, the immediate effects on you are less than they used to be. As your drinking changes, your tolerance to alcohol will also change.

If your body has become tolerant to alcohol, cutting down on your drinking may not be enough to reduce the harm to your body and mind, so please contact your doctor or local alcohol support services for help.

Visit the following website for advice:

**[www.nhsinform.co.uk/
support-services/topics/a/
alcohol.aspx](http://www.nhsinform.co.uk/support-services/topics/a/alcohol.aspx)**

A 2007 report stated that around 50% of people who died by suicide in Scotland in the previous ten years had a history of alcohol misuse.

Increasing tolerance to alcohol does not mean less gets into your bloodstream. It could even mean that drinking is likely to be more harmful. High tolerance could be an early sign of your body relying on alcohol to get by and that you might soon start to have withdrawal symptoms.

myth: Drinking coffee, taking a cold shower, or getting fresh air will sober you up.

fact

None of these things help you to sober up, they simply make you less sleepy. The only way to sober up is to not drink alcohol for a period of time.

myth: Alcohol warms you up.

fact

Alcohol actually takes heat away from your body after a short while.

myth: Drinking at some stages of life is more safe than at others, such as young people first trying alcohol.

fact

There is no level of drinking which is completely safe for everyone, even young people who have just started to drink – they will be less able to handle the effects of alcohol.

myth: Some drinks are less harmful to you – sticking to beer or wine is safer than drinking spirits.

fact

All alcohol is harmful, no one type is less damaging than the others.

Next steps

This chapter has shown how alcohol affects our bodies and behaviour, and what the medical advice is on how much is too much. But sometimes that's not enough in itself to make us cut down or cut out alcohol altogether – we need to **want** to do that.

We drink for lots of reasons and the next chapter looks at some of these, as well as the triggers for drinking too much. It helps you to work out why you might want to cut down, and work through some of the fears you might have in cutting down the amount you drink.

Alcohol is implicated as a factor in a large number of crimes, such as assault, vandalism and drink-driving offences.

did you know?

You can still fail a breathalyser test after a night's sleep, depending on how much you drank the night before.



70% of assaults in Scotland requiring A&E treatment are thought to involve alcohol. The majority of these take place at the weekend and they mostly involve young men.

There are many different reasons why we drink, from keeping up with friends on a night out, to being sociable, to pouring a glass of wine at the end of the day to help us relax.

If you begin to use alcohol regularly to 'wind down' or because you feel worried or sad, your drinking could become a habit and you might start to think you can't get by without it.

Alcohol might seem to make you feel better, or like you are more able to cope, but this feeling does not last. The more you drink, the more likely you are to feel depressed and anxious in the long term. It's much better to break the cycle now, before it gets to that stage.

Instead, you could find other things to do that make you feel good without damaging your health. The next chapter has some ideas on how to do this.

Try not to think of alcohol as an everyday product like bread or milk. Think of it more like an occasional treat.

Drinking too much is a habit that has built up over time and it takes time to break a habit.



Sleep problems

If you are drinking at night to help you sleep, you should look for reasons why you are finding it difficult to drop off. Do you have stresses at work, or at home? Are you worried about money? Or have you always had trouble sleeping?

If you take a certain amount of alcohol regularly, it will gradually lose its effect and you will need to drink more to get the same sleepy feeling. Try speaking to your doctor about your sleeping problems or call one of the contacts in this book to talk through anything on your mind that's keeping you awake.

Drinking because of worries about things like problems in a relationship, unemployment, money troubles or the loss of a loved one is a very short-term solution that, over time, could make you feel even worse. The truth is that drinking **never** solves the problem.

did you know?

Sales data shows that enough alcohol was sold in Scotland in 2009 for every adult over the age of 16 to exceed the adult male weekly guideline every single week.



We all need support to help work through our troubles. If you would like to speak to someone about what you're going through, try speaking to your GP as he or she will be able to refer you to a counsellor. Or contact any of the organisations listed at the back of this book.

Why do I want to cut down?

There are many reasons for wanting to cut down. Perhaps your health has been affected already, or your relationships are beginning to suffer.

- Have you noticed that your moods are changing, that you are more depressed or more aggressive after a heavy night?
- Have you got into trouble with the police when drunk?
- Do you feel guilty or ashamed about your drinking?
- Are you spending more time drinking than enjoying any other interests?

Even if you have a slip at some point, the next chapter will show you how to keep moving forwards so you can be happier and healthier, and stay that way.

Some people will want to cut out alcohol completely or may be advised to do so by a health professional, for example:

- If you have already suffered permanent medical damage from alcohol (such as alcohol-related brain damage) or if your doctor has told you there is a medical reason why you should not drink.
- If you have had a drinking problem in the past and solved it by cutting out alcohol completely.
- If you are pregnant – drinking could harm your baby.
- If you are on medication that states 'no alcohol'.

Whatever the reason, the fact you have taken control of the situation and are now working through this book is a great start. You have realised that you need to make a positive change and have found the right help to support you through cutting down.

Make sure you have the support of someone close to you – including a professional supporting you in cutting down your drinking – so they understand what you want to achieve and can help support you while you work towards your goals.

Before you can start to cut down your drinking, you should first find out what your drinking habits are, so you can break out of them. You might not even realise you have habits until you write them down. So this is where you make a start.

At the end of this chapter is a diary where you can keep a note of when, where, and how much you drink. It runs over 12 weeks, so you will be able to see if your drinking follows any patterns.

Every time you have an alcoholic drink you should write it down as soon as possible before you forget what you've had. And be honest. There isn't much point in pretending to yourself that you are drinking less – taking control of your drinking means trusting yourself that you can make a change.

Even a small change is a good start and allows time for new habits to become more routine.

Keeping a diary is an important way to look at your drinking pattern. A diary can keep a focus on what you are trying to achieve.

Here is a sample diary page:

Drinks diary week 1



Date	Time	Place	Who with	Activities	Cost	Consequences	Units
Fri 4th	1-2pm	Thai Dragon	Workmates	Eating	£7	Sleepy	6
Fri 4th	5-7pm	Bar Alba	Alan, James	None	£12	Late getting home	9
Sat 5th	9-11pm	Home	Fiona	Watching TV	£5.99	Hangover	10
Sun 6th	12-3pm	Bar Alba	James, Adam, dad	Watching football	£20		11
Sun 6th	4-8pm	Home	Fiona, mum, dad	Dinner	£5	Argued with Fiona	10
Tue 8th	6.30-8pm	Bar Alba	Alan, James	None	£12.00	Late getting home	7
Thu 10th	6.30-8pm	Bar Alba	Alan, James	None	£15.00	Lost jacket	8

See how easy it is to
let the units build up



Total for the week **61**

Under 'Consequences' you can put either good or bad things that happen as a result of your drinking – from meeting new people to arguing with your partner. Maybe nothing happens at all, and that's okay too. But you should keep track of every drinking session you have in a day as separate entries, not lumping them together.

You might also find it useful to make a note of how you were feeling when you started drinking, for example, 'happy', 'down' or 'stressed'.

Reflect on your levels of drinking, the harm you may be causing to yourself and to those around you.

Get to know your habits

As you start to cut down, keeping a detailed track of your drinking will mean you can see if things are getting better, or getting worse again. You can also see what your risky drinking habits are. These are times when your drinking causes you problems, such as hangovers, being late for work, falling down, arguing with your friends, and so on.

By keeping a diary you can see if there are certain things that make these kinds of drinking sessions stand out. Do you tend to end up in a fight after the monthly pub quiz? Or do you end up home late and being sick after drinking with workmates on a Friday night? When you feel down, do you drink too much at home and end up late for work the next day?

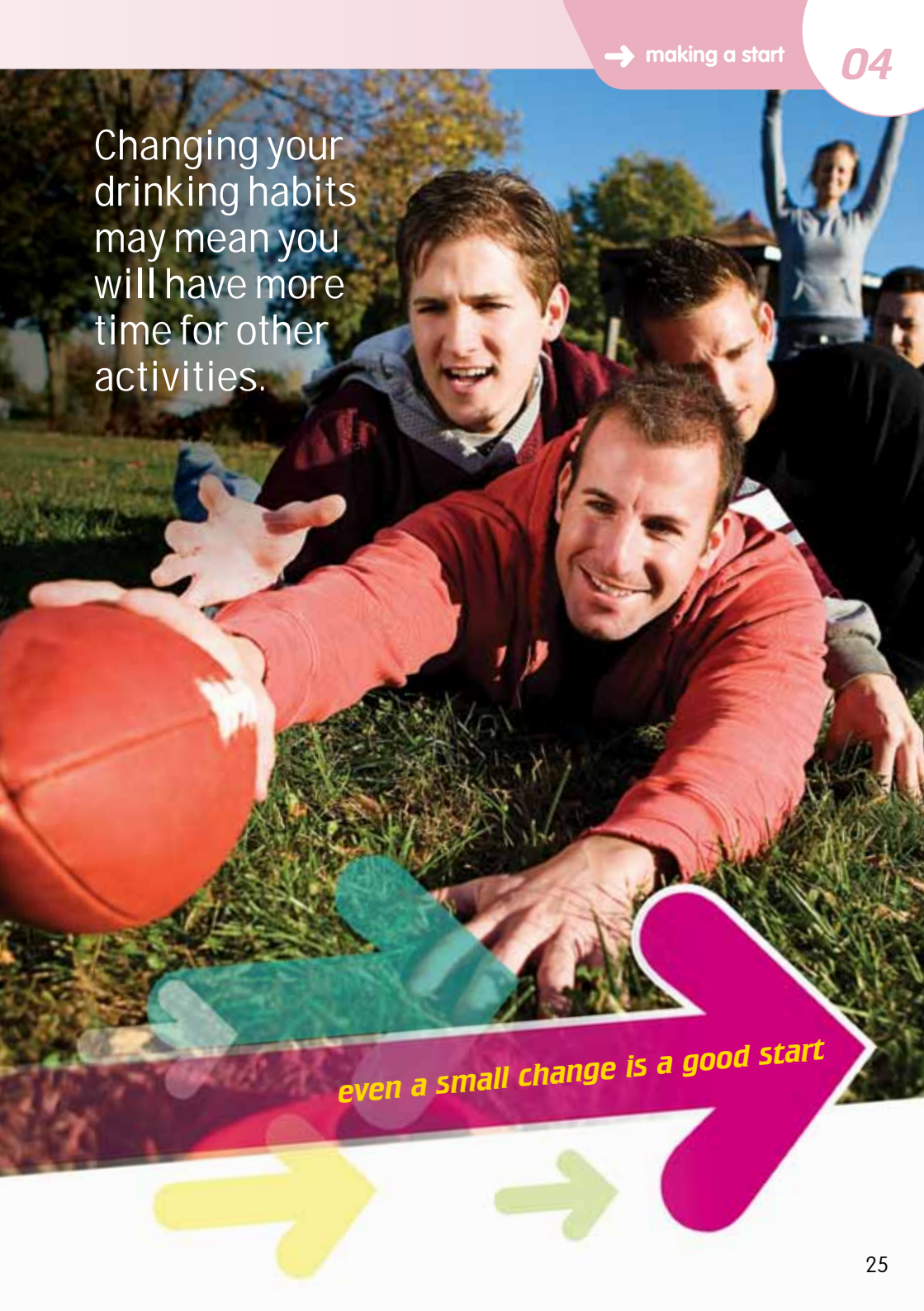
When you see that there are common situations where your drinking can cause problems, you can look at getting out of these situations, or changing your behaviour so you can still enjoy them with less alcohol.

Why not start writing down your drinking habits today?

If you open a bottle of wine at home, don't feel you have to drink it all in one night. Savour each glass and try to space the bottle out – it will save you money too.

Remember, **you** are the one who decides how much you drink. You can say no if someone is buying a round, or choose to have a soft drink instead.

Changing your drinking habits may mean you will have more time for other activities.



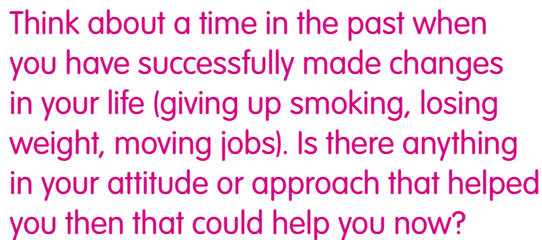
even a small change is a good start



Drinking rules

You will need to plan the changes you want to make. Ask yourself some questions (you may find that you need to fill in the diary for a couple of weeks before some answers become clear):

- What time of day do I tend to drink?
- What do I do while I drink?
- How much time each day am I spending drinking?
- How much money do I spend on alcohol each week?
- Where do I tend to drink?
- Are there things that tend to happen when I drink?
- Who do I usually drink with?
- On average, how many units do I drink a week?



Think about a time in the past when you have successfully made changes in your life (giving up smoking, losing weight, moving jobs). Is there anything in your attitude or approach that helped you then that could help you now?

The answers to these questions will help you to identify some 'drinking rules' that you can stick to as you start to cut down. You can write down your drinking rules below. These can be anything you think will help you, for example:

- 1 *I will never drink more than 4 units in one session*
- 2 *I will avoid going to the pub quiz until I feel stronger about refusing alcohol*
- 3 *I will only drink soft drinks during the day*

My drinking rules:

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 _____

Daily cut-off

Like the example on the previous page, one of your drinking rules should be a target of how many units to stick to in one day (see pages 8 and 9 for a reminder of what a unit is).

Your daily cut-off depends on how much you are drinking at the moment, and how many units you would ideally like to cut down to – use your drinks diary to help work it out. To start with, it might be useful to find a number somewhere in the middle. You can come back to it as your confidence grows and you are ready to cut down more. Talk to your health professional about a number of units that is manageable for you.

You should also aim to drink less than your cut-off and, on some days, try to not drink at all.

Switch to a smaller glass if you are drinking at home.

But remember, any progress is good progress. Some people will find it easier to cut down to their end target straight away. For others, it could be better to start slowly and keep cutting down, rather than pushing yourself too hard and then giving up.

My daily cut-off is:

units

On a night out, try going home earlier than you would usually, before you feel drunk. It might be hard at first, but you will feel proud of yourself in the morning when you wake up without a hangover.

How to do it

Here are some things you can do to help you cut down your drinking.

Eating

Try to eat well before drinking, or even during drinking. Alcohol will be absorbed more slowly. If you eat salty snacks like crisps or peanuts, drink a non-alcoholic spacer – otherwise you will feel thirsty and might drink more alcohol.

Change your drink

Change to something with a lower alcohol content or consider having some non-alcoholic drinks instead.

Learn to refuse drinks

You are the one who decides when, where, and how much you drink. Think of things you can say to refuse drinks. But you don't have to explain why you are saying no, just say no.

Know how much you have had to drink

Record every drink in your diary. If you are at a party or drinking at home, try to work out how much you are drinking. Don't refill your glass, for example, unless it is empty – otherwise you could lose track of what you have drunk.

Slow down and pace yourself

Even though you have set a daily cut-off and are beginning to drink in less risky situations, you might still be finding it hard to cut down. One common problem is drinking too fast. If you want to drink less, you should try to drink slowly. Take longer to drink one drink, such as drinking one pint of beer over one hour.

Use an alcohol measure or measuring cup when pouring spirits or wine so you know how many units you are having.



Ideas to help you succeed

Occupy yourself

Do something else while you are drinking: play a game, read a newspaper, talk to your friends, sing karaoke, use your MP3 player – anything to occupy your hands and your mind.

Drink for the taste

Savour what you are drinking rather than knocking it back and put your glass down between sips.

Dilute your spirits

The longer the drink, the longer it will take to drink it.

Don't buy in bulk. It is tempting to take advantage of special offers in the supermarket, but if you have a lot of alcohol in the house you'll be tempted to drink more of it more often.

Avoid 'rounds' and keeping up

If drinking with close friends, tell them you are trying to cut down and they should understand. If this is difficult or you are in a different situation with, say work colleagues, choose non-alcoholic 'spacer' drinks for some of the rounds. Or buy yourself a soft drink when it is your turn to get the round in.

Don't match your friends drink for drink. Remember that everyone has different tolerance levels to alcohol – they are different weights, different genders, different ages.

Put yourself first

You must take responsibility for your own drinking and not feel pressured by people to 'keep up' with them. Friends like this are not looking out for you and you should avoid seeing them around alcohol.

If you are tired and tense after a long day, instead of having a drink, try a relaxing bath or a refreshing shower.

Try speaking to someone in a similar situation to you, or someone whose advice you value. Getting support from a friend, family member or health professional can really help you to stay motivated, or deal better with setbacks.

Pregnant women or women trying to conceive should avoid drinking alcohol. There is no 'safe' time for drinking alcohol during pregnancy and there is no 'safe' amount. Drinking no alcohol during pregnancy is the best and safest choice.

did you know?

It takes the liver one hour to process one unit of alcohol.



What can I do instead?

You might be nervous about socialising without drinking, but there are many things you can do with friends where you don't have to drink alcohol to have fun, from going to the cinema to joining a gym. Use the money you would have spent on alcohol to treat yourself to an alternative day or night out.

Physical activity

Take up physical activity at whatever level you are comfortable, from running with friends or playing football, to gentle walking or swimming. Physical activity helps improve not only physical health but mental wellbeing and helps tackle issues like depression, stress and anxiety.

Contract

Now you are ready to make an important promise to yourself that you will cut down your drinking. It might seem odd, but you should also sign it and date it. If you are going through a bad patch, you can look back on this to remind yourself how much you wanted to make a change for the better.

I want to cut down on my drinking.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Remember, one of the benefits of not drinking at all on a night out is that you can drive yourself home.



There are many things you can do with friends where you don't have to drink alcohol to have fun.

treat yourself to an alternative day or night out

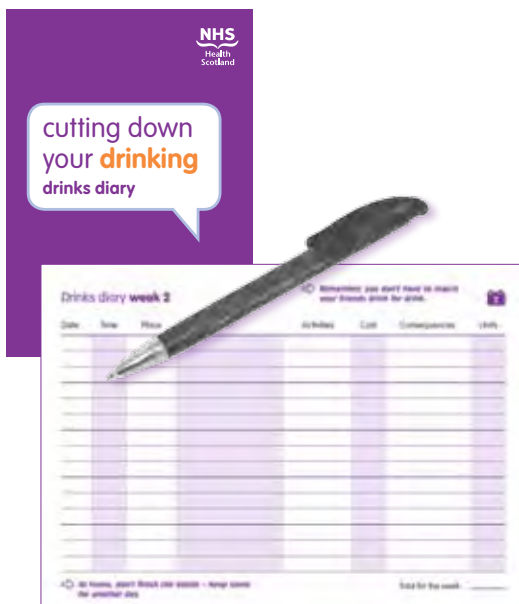
Drinks diary

To get the maximum benefit from using this book, you should fill in your drinks diary every day, as soon as possible after drinking. You can write down all the units you drink and add them up at the end of the week to give you a weekly total.

Remember: you can put both good and bad things down in the 'Consequences' of drinking column, and you should record each drinking session separately if there is more than one session in a day.

You are not just changing old damaging habits like drinking too much, you are starting to learn new healthier ones like how to be in control and drink in a way that you know is okay for you.

Be careful when writing down units from drinks poured at home or at a friend's house because, unless you are using a measure, these will probably be a larger measure than you would get in the pub and will therefore contain more units of alcohol.



Drinks diary week 1



Date	Time	Place	Who with	Activities	Cost	Consequences	Units

Total for the week

[illegible]

Total for the week

Drinks diary week 3



Date	Time	Place	Who with	Activities	Cost	Consequences	Units

Total for the week

[illegible]

Total for the week

Drinks diary week 5



Date	Time	Place	Who with	Activities	Cost	Consequences	Units

Total for the week

[illegible]

Total for the week

Drinks diary week 7



Date	Time	Place	Who with	Activities	Cost	Consequences	Units

Total for the week _____

Drinks diary week 8



Date	Time	Place	Who with	Activities	Cost	Consequences	Units

Total for the week

Drinks diary week 9



Date	Time	Place	Who with	Activities	Cost	Consequences	Units

Total for the week _____

Drinks diary week 10



Date	Time	Place	Who with	Activities	Cost	Consequences	Units

Total for the week

Drinks diary week 11



Date	Time	Place	Who with	Activities	Cost	Consequences	Units

Total for the week

Drinks diary week 12



Date	Time	Place	Who with	Activities	Cost	Consequences	Units

Total for the week _____

Changing your drinking rules

When you have been keeping your drinks diary for about six weeks, you might like to look over your drinking rules again. Maybe you feel your drinking behaviour has changed, either for worse or better, or you have noticed other patterns you weren't aware of before.

Have a think again about the times when your drinking causes you problems, and times when you can have a drink and everything is fine. You might want to ask yourself the same questions you asked yourself in the last chapter. Again, look for things that these times have in common and then, if you want to, you can write a new set of drinking rules.

My new drinking rules:

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____

At this point, only if you feel ready, you might also want to lower your daily cut-off limit. If you think it would be useful, you could have a chat with a health professional before you do this.

My new daily cut-off is:

_____ units

As you cut down how much you are drinking, you might sometimes get a strong craving for a drink. This could happen at any time, taking you by surprise, or you might expect it if you are in a place where you would usually have a drink, or if you are feeling a certain way. This is totally normal, but it is how you cope with this craving that matters.

Delay

Rather than having a drink as soon as you feel like one, put it off for as long as you can. Sometimes, when you do this, the craving goes away.

Distraction

Craving is partly to do with your mind focusing on thoughts and images of alcohol. If you change these thoughts you will stop craving, and the best way to do this is to distract yourself. Choose something you enjoy and that you can do straight away – maybe going for a run, reading, turning on the TV, calling a friend, or even having a cup of tea or coffee.

Thinking

If thoughts go through your mind like 'I really need a drink' when you are craving alcohol, then they will make the craving worse. The best way to deal with them is to replace them with thoughts like 'I don't need a drink' or 'I don't have to drink' and some positive ones like 'I want to get by without a drink'.

Look forwards, to when you have got past this difficult time, and about how good you will feel. This is not easy but, over time, if you keep trying to 'catch' the negative thoughts as they pop into your head, you will be well on the way to getting over your cravings.

There will be moments or events that might trigger a craving. Some of these will come from the world around you, others will be caused by your own feelings. Here are some possible craving triggers.

Knowing that certain situations might make you want to drink and preparing for how to deal with the craving will make dealing with the difficult times easier.



Coping with setbacks

As you cut down your alcohol, it is very possible that, at some point, you will have a slip. You might break one or more of your drinking rules, or go over your daily cut-off limit, or have a one-off binge drinking session that makes you feel you have let yourself down.

Instead of giving up or thinking 'what's the point?' use your slip as a positive push forwards, a reminder of why you wanted to cut down your drinking in the first place. Just because you have had a slip does not mean you are back at square one. You've come too far to give up.

The most important thing to remember is that nobody is perfect. It is normal to make mistakes. Drinking is a habit that has built up over time and it will take time to break.

To avoid slips, you should try to avoid situations where you know you will feel tempted to drink too much. You should now know the situations that lead to drinking and cause you problems. If you think you can't cope with drinking less in these situation it is maybe best, for a little while at least, to avoid them altogether. You will need to develop some coping skills that work for you.

There are other occasions which crop up out of the blue and make it more difficult to stick to your drinking rules, such as weddings, parties and other celebrations, holidays (including Christmas), trips away from home or meeting old friends.

Be aware that these occasions could be difficult for you and prepare for how you might feel – keep track of your thoughts and use the same tips as for managing cravings: delay, distraction, thinking. This could stop the slip happening in the first place.

If you have a slip, don't be put off. Think carefully about the reasons for it happening. Learn something from the experience and then you can stop it happening again.

Even a slip that you learn from is worth feeling good about.

Pocket drinks diary

Attached to this book is a pocket drinks diary. After completing the 12 weekly diary pages in this book, it will be helpful to continue by keeping the attached pocket diary up to date each time you drink. It will help you to keep close track of how you are getting on with meeting your drinking rules. It will also help to keep you focused on your goal of changing the way you drink until it becomes normal to drink less.

Remember, you are not just changing old damaging habits like drinking too much, you are – more importantly – starting to learn new healthier ones, like how to be in control and drink in a way that you know is okay for you.

Don't forget to reward yourself for the changes you are making. You can keep lowering your cut-off point and congratulate yourself with each success in meeting your goal.

Keep motivated, reward successes

Changing a habit like drinking too much can be hard, but it is one that you are now beginning to take control of. Recognise how well you are doing and reward yourself – buy something with the money you have saved, or do something that helps you feel good. Do this regularly as you notice you are making real changes in your drinking habits.

You have started to change your attitude to alcohol and that's a habit you can keep for a lifetime once it has become normal for you.

You may now be starting to see some of the following benefits:

- you are sleeping better and have more energy
- you are looking better – your eyes and skin seem brighter, you may be losing some weight
- headaches and upset stomachs happen less often
- you are feeling less anxious, less stressed out, less down and depressed
- you are concentrating better
- you are enjoying life with your family and friends more
- you are saving money
- you also feel generally healthier and happier
- you feel good about yourself and your ability to change
- you are taking control.

Recognise
how well you
are doing and
reward yourself
– feel good about
changing for
the better.

your new attitude is a habit you can keep for a lifetime

Frequently asked questions

How do I know if I'm drinking too much?

See the recommended guidance on page 9.

How long will it take to cut down on my drinking for the better?

This book contains a 12-week drinks diary to start the process, and encourages you to carry on monitoring your drinking until your drinking habits have changed for good. Everybody is different, and how long it takes will be an individual thing.

Where can I get help to stop drinking altogether?

For more information on local support services see:

www.nhsinform.co.uk/support-services/topics/a/alcohol.aspx

I can handle my drink, does that make a difference?

No. Your tolerance to alcohol makes no difference to its effect on your health, and could be a warning sign of dependency (see page 15).

Is it okay to take all my weekly units at the same time?

No, you have to pace your units in order not to overload your body (see page 10) and you should have at least two alcohol-free days per week.

Who can help me?

It might be your doctor who works through this book with you, or a nurse or a dedicated worker from alcohol support services.

Where can I get help for other problems that make me want to drink?

See pages 56–57.

What is a unit?

1 unit is equal to 10 ml of pure alcohol. The number of units of alcohol in a drink depends on the size and strength of the drink. 1 pint of normal strength lager (4% abv) = 2.2 units of alcohol (see page 8).

How many daily/weekly units for a man?

Men should not drink more than 3–4 units per day, and no more than 21 units per week (see page 9). Remember to have at least two alcohol-free days per week.

How many daily/weekly units for a woman?

Women should not drink more than 2–3 units per day and no more than 14 units per week. For women who are pregnant or trying to conceive, drinking no alcohol is the best and safest choice (see page 9). Remember to have at least two alcohol-free days per week.

What about drinking and driving?

It's best just not to drink at all if you are going to drive. There is no fail-safe guide as to how much you can drink and stay under the limit. How alcohol affects you depends a lot on your age, gender, whether or not you have eaten anything and if you are taking other drugs.

The current (2011) penalties for anyone caught drink-driving are:

- to be banned from driving for at least 12 months
- to be fined up to £5,000
- to get three or more penalty points on their licence. You can also be sent to prison for up to six months.

Organisations that can help you

Your GP or nurse will be able to refer you to the appropriate alcohol support or other support services you might require:

Drinkline Scotland is a confidential advice and information line.

Freephone **0800 7 314 314**

NHS inform provides information on alcohol misuse and local support services.

Freephone **0800 22 44 88**

www.nhsinform.co.uk/health-zones/alcohol.aspx

Alcoholics Anonymous provides advice and a network of informal support sessions for dependent drinkers.

National Helpline **0845 769 7555**

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Drink Smarter provides information on health and wellbeing issues linked to alcohol and provides advice on ways to reduce alcohol consumption.

www.drinksmarter.org

Alcohol Focus Scotland provides information on alcohol issues.

0141 572 6700 **www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk**

Breathing Space is a confidential Scottish phoneline for anyone feeling low or depressed, or just needing someone to talk to.

Freephone **0800 83 85 87**

Monday–Thursday 6 pm–2 am, Friday 6 pm–Monday 6 am

www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk

The Mental Health Foundation works to improve services for anyone affected by mental health problems, whatever their age and wherever they live.

Edinburgh **0131 555 5959** Glasgow **0141 572 0125**

www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Samaritans provides confidential, non-judgemental emotional support, 24 hours a day.

08457 90 90 90

www.samaritans.org

NHS 24 provides health information and self-care advice for people in Scotland.

08454 24 24 24 **www.nhs24.com**

CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably) is aimed at young men aged 15 to 35 – help, information and advice.

Freephone **0800 58 58 58**

Saturday–Tuesday only, 5 pm–midnight

www.thecalmzone.net

These extracts are taken from real-life stories provided by the Glasgow Alcohol and Drug Partnership. They are here to inspire you and to show you that, even in very difficult situations, it is possible to overcome a problem with alcohol. The full stories (and others) can be read at: www.storiesofrecovery.org.uk

real-life stories

1

My revolution

I started drinking when I was 13. I remember getting caught out, one Saturday, in the local pub. The person sitting next to me leaned over and said, 'did I not just see you arguing with the bus driver for a child fare?' I was a weekend drinker for a long time and my dependency grew at a menacingly slow rate. I didn't realise when I had crossed all the invisible lines: drinking regularly throughout the week, having blackouts.

I've got new friends now that I met through music, at a gig. Music is one of my positive new coping mechanisms. It makes me feel good. It relaxes me and I forget all my worries. Sometimes I dance around the living room. It's the best workout, my heart is bursting with joy and I'm not high on spirits, but my spirits are most definitely high!

real-life stories

2

Loved back to life

I agreed that I probably drank too much as there were some nights I just couldn't remember; I would end up being violent and aggressive. I would wake up not knowing how I had got home or what I had done. Deep down I believe I was really sick of living this life but a way out of it didn't really seem possible.

I suffered terrible mood swings before and after drinking, I didn't get into trouble every time I was drunk but every time I got into trouble I was drunk.

My partner left me two days after I started in AA but I didn't drink. It hurt so badly but I didn't lift a drink because I knew from that first meeting that I had used alcohol to cope with many things in my life. I haven't touched any mind-altering substances since being in AA and I was so happy and proud of myself to celebrate my first year sober.

I have a relationship with someone new today; I have an amazing relationship with my family and I can look myself in the mirror again. Even when times get tough my worst day sober is much better than my best day drunk.

Doing it for me

I didn't want to admit I had a problem. For five years that was my life, drinking, getting detoxed, getting into jail. I just woke up one morning and said to myself, I don't want this life any more.

I still have panic attacks, even though I don't drink, but now I know what's happening to me. I don't let it frighten me now. I sit down, do my breathing exercises, and stay calm. I went through counselling and they taught me how to cope with my panic attacks. What has also really helped is going to my women's group. I've done lots of things with them: keep-fit, computing, storytelling, reading groups. Now I help with the new women coming in and that makes me feel good, being able to help someone who's just starting to recover from alcohol, because I've been there myself.

I'm doing it for me, because I don't want to have that horrible feeling again, when my hand was shaking so badly I couldn't hold a pen. That was like being in a living nightmare. I was killing myself with the drink. My liver was damaged, inflamed. Now, I don't need to worry about my liver.

My confidence has grown. I can deal with life and try new things and I'm able to watch my grandweans growing up. I want to live my life and see them enjoying theirs.

