

BRIGHTER FUTURES

Reducing Alcohol: Practical Steps

Straightforward ways to understand your drinking and make changes

Notice the pattern, choose a change, take it at your own pace

This guide revisits material from an earlier Brighter Futures alcohol-awareness project and has been completely revised using current UK guidance.

Revised by Brighter Futures - August 2026

Thinking about drinking less?

You do not have to wait until alcohol has become a major problem before changing the amount you drink. Some people want to spend less, sleep better, feel more in control, improve their health, or simply see what life feels like with less alcohol.

The useful starting point is not a label. It is an honest look at what you drink now and whether you would like anything to be different.

Current UK lower-risk guidance

For adults who drink alcohol, the UK Chief Medical Officers advise that it is safest not to drink more than **14 units a week on a regular basis**. If you drink as much as 14 units, spread them over **3 or more days**. Having several alcohol-free days each week can also help if you are trying to cut down.

The 14-unit guideline is about keeping health risks lower; it does not mean that drinking up to 14 units is risk-free. Drinking less reduces risk.

Pregnancy

If you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, the safest approach is not to drink alcohol at all.

Important: do not stop suddenly if you may be dependent on alcohol

If you get shaking, sweating, anxiety, nausea or other withdrawal symptoms when you have not had a drink, get medical advice before stopping or cutting down. Sudden withdrawal can be dangerous. Speak to a GP or an alcohol support service.

Know what you are drinking

Alcoholic drinks vary greatly in strength and serving size. Counting “drinks” can therefore be misleading. Units give a more useful picture.

1 unit = 10ml (or 8g) of pure alcohol.

These examples are approximate:

Drink	Approx. units
25ml single spirit at 40% ABV	1.0
440ml can of beer/lager at 4% ABV	1.8
Pint (568ml) of beer/lager at 4% ABV	2.3
175ml glass of wine at 13% ABV	2.3
250ml large glass of wine at 13% ABV	3.3

Check the label where possible. Many cans and bottles now show the number of units they contain. Home measures can also be much larger than pub measures, particularly with wine and spirits.

A useful experiment

For one week, measure a home-poured glass of wine or spirit rather than estimating it. The difference between the amount you think you pour and the amount you actually pour can be surprisingly useful information.

If you take medicines or have a health condition, ask a GP or pharmacist whether alcohol may affect your treatment or symptoms.

Start by noticing the pattern

The earlier version of this guide suggested keeping a drinking diary. That remains one of the simplest ways to understand what is happening before trying to change it.

For a week, make a note of:

- **when** you drank
- **what and how much** you drank
- **roughly how many units** that was
- **where you were and who you were with**
- **what was happening beforehand** - for example stress, boredom, habit, a meal or a social occasion
- **how you felt afterwards** - physically and emotionally

Look for the easiest change first

You may find that one drink is especially automatic: the glass poured while cooking, a drink immediately after work, or an extra round at the end of an evening. Changing one predictable habit can be easier than trying to redesign everything at once.

A simple diary

When?	What / how much?	Units	What was going on?

Practical ways to drink less

There is no single trick that works for everybody. Pick two or three changes that fit the way you actually drink.

- **Decide before you start.** Choose what you plan to drink rather than deciding after each glass.
- **Use smaller measures.** A smaller wine glass or a single rather than a double spirit reduces the amount without requiring a completely different routine.
- **Choose lower-strength drinks.** Check the ABV on the label; small differences in strength add up across an evening.
- **Alternate alcoholic and alcohol-free drinks.** Water, a soft drink or an alcohol-free alternative can slow the pace of the evening.
- **Build in alcohol-free days.** Decide which days they will be rather than leaving them to chance.
- **Avoid topping up a glass.** Finishing one measure before pouring another makes it easier to know how much you have had.
- **Do not automatically join every round.** It is fine to skip one or buy your own drink.
- **Change the cue.** If you always drink at the same time or in the same place, try putting another activity there instead.
- **Buy with a plan.** Keeping less alcohol at home can remove the easiest route to an unplanned extra drink.
- **Slow the pace.** Give yourself time between drinks rather than treating an empty glass as a signal to refill it.

Food is not a safety device

Eating before or while drinking may slow how quickly alcohol is absorbed, but it does not remove the alcohol or reduce the number of units you have consumed.

Habits, social situations and pressure

For many people, the difficult part of cutting down is not calculating units. It is changing a routine or dealing with other people's expectations.

Plan for the situation you know is coming

- If somebody usually tops up your glass, tell them you are keeping track and would rather pour your own.
- If rounds make you drink faster, opt out or have an alcohol-free drink for one round.
- If you are going somewhere where you usually drink heavily, decide beforehand when you will leave or how you will get home.
- If you drink mainly because you are bored, lonely or stressed, think about what could occupy the same part of the evening instead. The replacement does not need to be impressive - a walk, a film, cooking, phoning somebody or a hobby can be enough to break the automatic pattern.
- Tell one person what you are trying to do if you think their support would help.

You do not owe anyone a complicated explanation

"I'm cutting down for a bit", "I'm having an alcohol-free night" or simply "No thanks" are complete answers. Other people may notice your change more at first than they will later.

Driving

Do not use unit-counting as a way of deciding whether you are safe to drive. Alcohol affects people differently, and alcohol can remain in your body the next morning. If you are driving, the safest approach is not to drink.

When cutting down is difficult

Sometimes practical changes are enough. Sometimes they are not. Needing help does not mean that you have failed; it means that alcohol may have become harder to change without support.

It is worth getting advice if:

- you often feel that you **need** a drink rather than simply want one
- you repeatedly drink more than you intended
- your drinking is affecting relationships, work, money, sleep or health
- other people are concerned about your drinking
- you have tried to cut down several times and found it very difficult
- you experience withdrawal symptoms such as shaking, sweating, anxiety, nausea or feeling unwell until you drink

Withdrawal can require medical treatment

If you may be physically dependent on alcohol, do not suddenly stop drinking without medical advice. Severe withdrawal can include hallucinations, severe tremors or seizures. These require urgent medical attention.

Where to start

A GP can talk through your drinking and help you decide what support is appropriate. NHS alcohol services can also provide help with reducing or stopping drinking, counselling, group support and treatment where needed.

Drinkline: 0300 123 1110 - free, confidential help for anyone concerned about their own or somebody else's drinking.

Find local alcohol support in England:

nhs.uk/nhs-services/find-alcohol-addiction-support-services/

Make one small plan

A specific plan is usually more useful than “I should drink less”. Write down something you can actually try and review it after a week or two.

Why would I like to drink less?
What do I notice about my drinking now?
What is one change I will try first?
Which days, places or situations are likely to be difficult?
What will I do instead?
Who could I tell or ask for support?
When will I review how it went?

If it does not go exactly to plan

Treat that as information, not a verdict. Look at when the plan broke down and change the plan. A smaller target that you can repeat is often more useful than a dramatic change that lasts two days.

About this guide

This resource is intended for general information and practical self-help. It is not a diagnosis, treatment plan or substitute for medical advice.

Alcohol can interact with medicines and can affect some physical and mental health conditions. If you are unsure whether drinking or reducing your drinking is safe for you, speak to a GP, pharmacist or other appropriate health professional.

Sources used for this revised edition

NHS - Alcohol advice and support

nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-advice/

NHS - Alcohol-use disorder

nhs.uk/conditions/alcohol-use-disorder/

NHS Better Health - Drink less alcohol

nhs.uk/better-health/drink-less/

UK Chief Medical Officers - Low Risk Drinking Guidelines

gov.uk/government/publications/alcohol-consumption-advice-on-low-risk-drinking

This edition replaces an earlier Rainbow Action Group booklet on reducing alcohol intake. The practical ideas that remain useful - such as keeping a diary, recognising triggers, slowing down and asking for support - have been retained in revised form, while outdated health guidance and service information have been removed.

Brighter Futures

Community wellbeing, creativity and connection in East Sussex

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