

Alcohol
and your
health



Concerned about someone's drinking?



The Alcohol and Your Health booklets

This booklet is one of the six booklets in the Alcohol and Your Health series.

Each of the booklets is written for a particular group. Four are for the drinker experiencing problems, one is for those close to the drinker, and one is for practitioners working in a brief intervention setting.

The series Alcohol and Your Health (2011) is by Ian MacEwan and is the third edition of the series originally called Your Drinking and Your Health written by Ian MacEwan and Greg Ariel, and based on concepts developed by the Scottish DRAMS project.

The Alcohol and Your Health series includes:

Is your drinking okay?

Cutting down

Stopping drinking

Maintaining the change

Concerned about someone's drinking?

Helping with problem drinking

Introduction

This booklet is for you if you are concerned about someone else's drinking. It gives you some ideas about what you may be able to do to help.

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PART 1

Understanding the problem

How much is too much?

You may have heard people say things like:

"I'm only a social drinker."

"I only drink beer, never spirits."

"I never drink on my own."

"I don't drink any more than my friends."

"I never drink before five o'clock."

Even if all of these are true, someone may still drink more than is sensible or safe, or in a way that causes problems. One question people often ask is, *"Are they an alcoholic?"*. Some people will be upset at being labelled an alcoholic and this can prevent them looking for help for their drinking. For this reason, it may be useful to ask instead, *"Is their drinking the cause of problems for them or for other people?"*. Others, however, may welcome the explanation for their drinking getting out of control.

Measuring the amount of alcohol in drinks

Alcohol is measured in many ways. One of the easiest ways is to convert the amount drunk into standard drinks (SDs).

Each SD contains the same amount (10 grams) of alcohol. This amount of alcohol is contained in a half-pint of beer, a small glass of wine or a pub measure of spirits. Therefore each represents one SD.

A look at the table on the next page shows the number of SDs there are in different drinks.

Important note:

Most wines you buy are 12.5% alcohol, although some are as low as 8% or as high as 15%. A glass (100ml) of 12.5% wine is one SD.



How many SDs in different drinks?

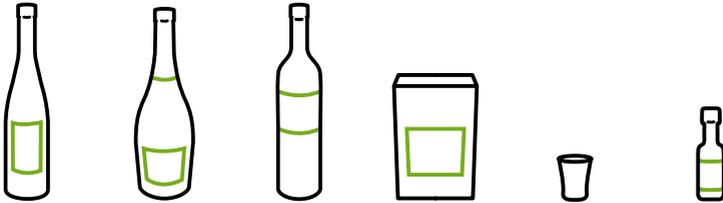
330ML CAN OF BEER @ 4% ALC 440ML CAN OF BEER @ 4.2% ALC 330ML BOTTLE OF BEER @ 5% ALC 330ML BOTTLE OF LITE BEER @ 2.5% ALC 750ML BOTTLE OF BEER @ 4% ALC 600ML PINT OF BEER @ 4.5% ALC 100ML GLASS OF TABLE WINE @ 12.5% ALC



1 1.5 1.3 0.7 2.4 2.1 1

STANDARD DRINKS

750ML BOTTLE OF WINE @ 13% ALC 750ML BOTTLE OF SPARKLING WINE @ 12% ALC 750ML BOTTLE OF WINE @ 14% ALC 3 LITRE CASK OF WINE @ 12.5% ALC 30ML OF STRAIGHT SPIRITS @ 45% ALC 50ML BOTTLE OF SPIRITS @ 37% ALC



7.7 7.1 8.3 30 1 1.5

STANDARD DRINKS

275ML BOTTLE OF RTD* SPIRITS @ 5% ALC 335ML BOTTLE OF RTD* SPIRITS @ 8% ALC 375ML BOTTLE OF SPIRITS @ 37.5% ALC 500ML BOTTLE OF SPIRITS @ 37.5% ALC 700ML BOTTLE OF SPIRITS @ 40% ALC 1000ML BOTTLE OF SPIRITS @ 47% ALC 1125ML BOTTLE OF SPIRITS @ 45% ALC



1.1 2.1 11 15 22 37 40

STANDARD DRINKS

* RTD (READY TO DRINK)
ALC refers to alcohol content by volume

Drinking advice from ALAC

ALAC's advice for reducing the risks from drinking over a lifetime

- For a healthy man drinking **no more than three standard drinks a day** reduces your risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury over a lifetime.
- For a healthy woman drinking **no more than two standard drinks a day** reduces your risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury over a lifetime.
- At least two alcohol free days a week are also recommended to reduce your risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury over a lifetime.

ALAC's advice for reducing the risk of alcohol-related injury on a single occasion

- Drinking **no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion for a woman and no more than five standard drinks for a man on a single occasion** reduces the risk of alcohol-related injury arising from that occasion.

If someone drinks more than these amounts, there is an increasing risk to their health; a risk that increases as their drinking increases.

However, these are general guidelines and some people may be at increased risk even at the lower levels given. These include pregnant women, who should not drink as the alcohol passes undiluted through the placenta to the fetus. Elderly people, those on medication and people with health problems should be especially careful.

Other problems, such as financial and relationship problems, can also occur at low levels of drinking.

Why people drink

We associate drinking with enjoyment and celebrations. But we also often use alcohol to make ourselves feel better when we are worried or unhappy, or to help us feel more confident with some people or in some situations. When alcohol is used in this way there is a danger that it will be relied upon. A drinking habit can build up, and we can become physically dependent on it. This means that we get used to having alcohol always in our bloodstream. If we stop drinking suddenly, we are likely to develop unpleasant (withdrawal) symptoms and may need medical help.

Some common problems

In families, relationships and friendships where someone is drinking heavily, there may be a number of problems.

- People may drink to deal with stress, but the drinking can make the situation worse. It's a vicious cycle.
- It may be difficult to know how a heavy drinker is going to behave next, which causes tension and uncertainty for those close to them.
- Communication can become difficult.
- Everything can start to revolve around the drinking, if that is the only thing that is thought and talked about.
- Those close to the drinker can feel ashamed of their behaviour and become cut off from everyone outside.

- Practical difficulties may include accidents and money, sexual, legal and health problems. Some of these, such as sexual problems or incontinence, may be embarrassing to talk about.
- Children understand more about what is going on than their parents realise, and this can be reflected in the way they behave.
- If the drinker no longer takes responsibility for things like paying bills or doing household tasks, other family members may take these over. This can lead to resentment on both sides.
- There may be arguments and violence.

It is distressing if someone you care about is drinking heavily. The following sections will look at what you can do. This includes what you can do to take care of yourself as well as how you can help the person whose drinking concerns you.

PART 2

What can you do: take care of yourself

Worrying all the time about your partner, lover, friend or family member leaves you drained of energy for yourself and anyone else. Both in your own interests and the interests of those around you, take care of yourself.

Being involved with someone with a drinking problem is difficult, so it's important that you have support. Heavy drinking is quite a common problem and many people will understand how you feel. Even if you feel embarrassed, don't be afraid to talk about it. Family and friends may offer help. You could join a group such as Al-Anon, which is a support group for relatives and partners of problem drinkers. Your doctor and alcohol and drug services will also assist. Whatever you do, don't cut yourself off from your friends. Friends are your best support.

It's important that you look after your health. If you get rundown and anxious, you will become ill. Think about finding ways to relieve the pressure. Also, if you have other things in your life that you enjoy outside the relationship with the problem drinker, you will deal better with the difficulties and keep a clearer view of the situation.



Looking after me

Think about how you deal with pressure, how you relax and the things in life you enjoy outside the relationship with the person with the drinking problem, then complete the following sentences. Some examples are given to help:

Table 1

The way I deal with pressure is to:

1. Get away on my own.
2. Visit a close friend and talk about it.
3. Go for a run or a walk or some other exercise.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Table 2**The things in my life that I enjoy doing are:**

1. Going to a movie.
2. Spending an evening with friends.
3. Reading or watching TV or gardening or some activity that I can get into.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Table 3**I can best relax by:**

1. Taking the dog for a walk.
2. Leaving the children with a friend.
3. A favourite activity like:
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Write down these things as a reminder, especially when the going gets tough and the pressure begins to build.

Many people believe that they are able to relax because they spend two or three hours every night watching TV. But this is not the case. Even while sitting in a chair, many of your muscles may be tensed up – even more so if you start thinking about the problems rather than what's on the screen.

Although it may seem strange, it takes effort to relax properly. You have to set up the conditions for your mind and body to relax completely. There are a number of ways of getting yourself to wind down.

Consider the following

1. Active relaxation

Physical exercise is a good way of getting rid of tension. The exercise does not have to be tiring. But if you are to benefit, it needs to be regular, at least two or three times a week.

Exercising can be sociable. Sports and exercise clubs are a good way of combining exercise with a social outing.

2. Passive relaxation

Muscle relaxation and meditation both require mental effort to relax the mind and body. These methods of relaxing should be carried out for 15 to 20 minutes each day to have the best effect. Setting aside this time is not easy, but your efforts to do so will be worth it. Even if meditating seems strange and practising it makes you self-conscious, give it a try. Joining a group is a way of getting started.

Sleep and a good diet are important for your health, wellbeing and dealing with difficulties. If you are not sleeping and have lost your appetite, see your doctor. When you do, tell them of your concerns about someone's drinking and how this is affecting you.

Set limits

Looking after yourself means being clear on what you are prepared to accept from the person who's drinking, and if they overstep these boundaries knowing what you will do. This is important if there is violence. Make sure that you know who to contact and where to go, and that you have enough money if you need to leave in a hurry. Do not put up with violence or abuse.

Think carefully, discuss with a trusted friend then write down what these limits will be. A couple of examples are given to help your thinking.



Table 1

I will not accept:

1. Violence of any kind, either physical or verbal.
2. Coming home drunk.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Table 2

If the above boundaries are overstepped, what I will do is:

1. Ring the police and/or stay with a friend.
2. Refuse to let him/her inside.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Table 3

My supporters are:

1. Women's Refuge	Phone:
2.	Phone:
3.	Phone:
4.	Phone:
5.	Phone:

Be assertive

We are responsible for our own behaviour, so don't accept blame for someone else's drinking. What you are responsible for is your reaction to it. It's not a good idea to try drinking along with them. It won't work as a way of controlling their drinking, and it will make things worse for you.

Standing by your decisions can be difficult, especially if you lack self-confidence, feel shy or find it hard to stick up for yourself.

People who find it hard to be assertive feel embarrassed, frustrated, angry and used. They bottle up their feelings and later explode over some trivial incident. Such 'explosions' worsen relationships that are already fraught with tension and problems.

If this is you, learn to be more assertive. Being assertive will help the drinker to understand clearly exactly what it is that you want and expect from them.

This booklet does not allow sufficient space to teach you to be fully assertive. However, the following tips will help.

'Confidence' and 'assertiveness' are skills like driving a car, playing an instrument or playing a sport. With training and practice you can behave in a more confident manner. And behaving more confidently makes you more confident.

If you lack confidence, why not behave as if you are confident a few times?

If someone asks you to do something that you don't want to do, stop and think. Do you normally say to yourself things like, "*I don't want to hurt his feelings by refusing*" or "*It's too much trouble to refuse, I'll just do it*"? If so, what you are really saying is, "*I don't want to say no*" or "*I am scared to say no*".

Try it and see. Be assertive. You'll feel better for it. Begin with situations in which you feel comfortable. Your confidence and your skills will grow.

But don't go too far. Assert yourself but don't be aggressive and don't do or say things that will put your safety, or the safety of others who depend on you, at risk.

Many places, such as local high schools, polytechnics and community centres, offer assertiveness training classes. These are advertised in community newspapers. If not, a Citizens Advice Bureau will point you in the right direction.

The following books may also be of help: *The Shy Person's Guide to Life* by Michael Bentine, Granada; *Feel the Fear & Do It Anyway* by Susan Jeffers, Arrow.

PART 3

What you can do: how to help

Neither you nor anyone else can make someone cut down or stop drinking, but you can encourage and help them to make changes.

Here are some ideas that you may find helpful:

- talk to the person you're worried about. Find a time when they are sober and when you're both calm
- talk about the problems their drinking is causing
- listen and find out how they feel and how the drinking helps
- don't get into arguments. Arguments, nagging or accusing will make it more difficult for the drinker to talk to you
- be clear about what behaviour you will not accept
- be clear about what action you will take if it still happens. Don't make idle threats
- be consistent – don't keep changing your mind about what you're saying, and don't say one thing and do another

- discuss with other close friends and members of the family what you are trying to do. This will make it easier for everyone to take a similar approach, and it will be less confusing to the person who is drinking
- help the person who's drinking to be realistic. Don't encourage promises that can't be kept. For example, the promise "I'll never drink again" is difficult to keep
- don't make it easier to drink by buying it for them, giving extra money or agreeing to go out drinking. It may be difficult to break these patterns, but they are more likely to take you seriously if your actions match your words
- helping the person to see the effects of their drinking might encourage change more quickly
- don't try to hide the effects from the drinker or other people, eg phoning work with excuses, clearing up the mess, putting them to bed or missing social events for fear of embarrassment
- encourage the person to concentrate on the problems caused by the drinking rather than using a label such as 'alcoholic'.

Under- standing change

There are four stages through which a person who is drinking passes before lasting change is achieved. Your help will be effective when matched to the stage where the drinker is at in terms of the change process.

The four stages of change are as follows:

1. I don't drink more than anyone else – no way!

At this stage the drinker doesn't want to look at how much they are drinking and they aren't upset by the negative consequences of the heavy drinking. It is only through changes occurring in the drinker's life that the possibility of a drinking problem begins to be considered.

People at this stage will be resistant to any suggestion that they should cut down or stop drinking. However, you can help the drinker to recognise their problem by encouraging them to consider how the drinking is affecting you.

2. Maybe I am drinking too much

The drinker is now more open to discussion of the problems caused by excessive drinking. They will have begun to draw up the pros and cons of heavy drinking.



At this stage, listen to the drinker. Talk to each other about the drinking, especially the sense of ambivalence surrounding it (I should stop but I don't want to/can't).

3. I definitely need to cut down/stop

After thinking things over, which may take some time, the person gets to the point of deciding to do something about it. The drinker needs to believe that they have the ability to change. Your support to assist with cutting down or stopping will be important.

4. I don't want to slip back – I'm in control

Cutting down or stopping drinking is half the struggle; the problem drinker must maintain the gains that have been made.

They will benefit from your support to avoid or cope with situations that make relapse more likely as well as how to guard against the danger of a gradual return to heavy drinking.

The *Maintaining the change* booklet from this series provides advice on avoiding relapses.

Relapses are common. The drinker may try several times before any lasting success is achieved. Understanding and accepting the 'wax and wane' nature of change will help you to feel less frustrated when the drinker doesn't progress as quickly as your hoping they will.

It is important to determine what stage the drinker is at. The more your help matches the correct stage, the more effective it will be.

For more information on how you might assist the drinker, read the companion booklets from the Alcohol and Your Health series.

Is your drinking okay?

Cutting down

Stopping drinking

Maintaining the change

You will find suggestions in the last three booklets that will be helpful to you as well as the drinker.

Expectations and goals

Once you've talked openly with the drinker you can agree on what changes you would like to see. You will both need to compromise. There will be a difference between what is ideal and what is realistic. You may want the person who is drinking to stop altogether. But if the drinker feels they can cut down it is a good idea to give this a trial period.

Most people find it easier to stop altogether, but some are able to cut down. Many need to experiment to find out what will work. If the drinker is cutting down, work together and be clear about what is acceptable, eg how much to drink, where, when and with whom, and the behaviour that goes with it:

- no violence
- no threats
- reduce debts
- be home at an agreed time.

If a decision is made to stop drinking, work together to avoid situations in which it might be difficult not to drink.

Read the companion *Stopping drinking or Cutting down* booklet to understand what is happening to the drinker.

Be realistic in your expectations. Drinkers (like smokers) often take several attempts before they make lasting changes.

It is a difficult change to make, so if you can see a serious attempt being made, support and encourage the drinker even if things do not always go according to plan. Remember though that you also need to consider yourself, and there is a limit to what you can stand.

What happens in a relationship if the drinker changes?

When someone reduces their drinking, both of you can expect many things to improve (health, finance, etc). However, it is unrealistic to expect that everything is going to be perfect. Your relationship is likely to change in a number of ways.

Up until now, you have had to take on most of the responsibilities in the home/family. Gradually, the person who has been drinking will want to play a fuller part in such things. You may find it difficult to hand over some of the responsibility. You need to find the right balance between making sure that things get done and showing your trust. It may be difficult for you to come to terms with the person becoming more independent.

Another thing that might cause problems is the sexual relationship. You will need to adjust to a different sex life if your partner's drinking changes.

Some of the problems that you thought were caused by the drinking may still exist. Long-term relationship problems are unlikely to go away overnight.

Be aware that there might be disadvantages as well as advantages for you. If you are prepared for this in advance, the changes made are more likely to be successful for everyone.

Communication is the key to coping with and adjusting to change.

By following the communication problem-solving tips outlined opposite you can ensure that a positive discussion occurs between you and the person coping with their drinking problem.



Communication problem-solving tips

1. Talk

- choose a suitable time for you both
- choose a suitable place for you both

2. Communicate

- outline your concerns and problems
- be specific
- say how it makes you feel
- outline the changes you would like

3. Listen and talk

- listen to the drinker's response
- don't interrupt, let them finish
- be fair
- compromise

4. Find solutions

- explore all options
- discuss changes you are both prepared to make
- select achievable solutions

5. Make decisions

- be specific about what needs to happen

6. Take action

- do what was agreed

7. Did it make a difference?

- review the decisions
- did they happen?
- if yes, how did you praise this?
- if no, rethink the solution and try again. Don't give up

If at any time your conversation becomes an argument, pause. Say the following or something similar to yourself.

"I care about myself."

"I care about this person."

"I want our relationship to be one that is enjoyable for both of us."

This will help bring your conversation back onto a positive track.

Avoid:

- put-downs and personal attacks
- threats, orders, demands
- saying "YOU always...", "Every time you...", "YOU never..."
- dredging up the past as ammunition
- adopting a closed position (making statements that stop further discussion or action)
- not being prepared to see a different point of view
- rambling (dragging in everything and getting off the topic).

Some couples find it helpful to seek a relationship counsellor.

Maintaining the change

When someone's drinking first starts to change, the effects may be dramatic and this is rewarding for everyone.

Watch out for the end of this 'honeymoon' period, when things start to become routine. It will take effort to maintain the changes that you've both made as the weeks and months go past. Think about:

- who does what in your relationship
- developing and keeping up new interests, both with each other and separately
- giving encouragement and praise and not focusing on the past.

Don't be surprised if there is a return to the previous drinking habit. Changing a drinking habit can be a long process, so don't give up too soon. Assess whether it is a slip (giving in to temptation but still wanting to stop or reduce) or a relapse (giving up). Stick with your drinker if it is the former, seek help from professionals if it is the latter.



PART 4

What happens if there is no change?

There is always a possibility that the person you are worried about will not make the changes you are hoping for. Prepare for this, and have ideas about what to do next. Now is the time to review what you expect and what you are prepared to tolerate.

Think about the changes you could make in your relationship:

- spend less time with the other person?
- re-think your role within the relationship?
- reduce your sense of responsibility for the other person and allow more time for yourself?

Perhaps there are other possibilities. List them:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

You have a right to an enjoyable and fulfilling life. If someone else's drinking is making your life difficult and there isn't a prospect of change, you may want to consider parting.

Decisions to separate are neither simple nor easy. Talk with a trusted friend or a trained counsellor. Help to get your thinking clear is good.

Whatever you do, working through the consequences for you will help. Draw up a list under the headings shown below.

Consequences of staying	
Positive	Negative
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

Do the advantages of leaving outweigh the advantages of staying?

Do the disadvantages of staying outweigh the disadvantages of leaving?

Only you can decide.

Consequences of leaving	
Positive	Negative
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

In the meantime, what to do in an emergency

Medical emergency – if the drinker becomes seriously ill, eg falls unconscious, has a seizure, is hallucinating, call an ambulance immediately.

Phone:

Phone:

Violence – if you are at risk of violence, ensure that you have somewhere or someone to go to. Women's Refuge offers help to any woman at risk. Call the police.

Phone:

Phone:

Children – if children are at risk, call the police.

Phone:

Phone:

Other emergencies

Phone:

Phone:

Remember

People do stop or change their drinking.

You are not responsible for another person's drinking, but you can play a part in helping that person to change.

Your relationship will be altered and you will both need to make adjustments.

You have the right to enjoy your life. Take care of yourself and make changes in a relationship that isn't working.

Professional help is available.



Where to get further help

The person who is drinking may be glad of any help that is offered. But if help is refused, it is very difficult to insist. Then get help for you.

Counselling services – in all areas a counselling service for problem drinkers and their partners and families is provided by a local alcohol and drug counselling service. Look under 'Alcohol' in the telephone directory.

Self-help groups – Al-Anon exists in some areas. Alcoholics Anonymous is for people who have decided to stop drinking altogether. Al-Anon is for the partners and adult family members of problem drinkers. Other self-help groups may also be helpful, for example women's support groups.

Medical services – your doctor will help. They can refer you and/or the drinker for help.

Community law service – gives advice and support in molestation orders.

Alcohol Helpline – phone free on 0800 787 797. Its counsellors will support you.

Add below other suggestions for getting help:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.



Wellington

ALAC National Office

PO Box 5023, Wellington 6145

phone 04 917 0060

fax 04 473 0890

email central@alac.org.nz

Auckland

ALAC Northern Office

PO Box 11791, Ellerslie, Auckland 1542

phone 09 916 0330

fax 09 916 0339

email northern@alac.org.nz

Christchurch

ALAC Southern Office

PO Box 2688, Christchurch 8140

phone 03 365 8540

fax 03 365 8542

email southern@alac.org.nz

Freephone 0508 258 258

Visit www.alcohol.org.nz or www.waipiro.org.nz

For help, contact the alcohol and drug helpline on **0800 787 797**



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