

Enjoying Alcohol Responsibly: Advice for older people

## DRUG & ALCOHOL ACTION TEAM

Cornwall and Isles of Scilly  
Promoting Recovery

### How many units there are in different drinks:

 Standard glass of wine (175ml) 11.5% ABV 2 units	 Large glass of wine (250ml) 12% ABV 3 units	 Bottle of wine (750ml) 12% ABV 9 units
 Pint of strong lager or beer 5.3% ABV 3 units	 Pint of normal strength lager or beer 3.5% ABV 2 units	 Can of normal strength lager (500ml) 4% ABV 2 units
 Spirits double (50ml) 40% ABV 2 Units	 Alcopop bottle (275ml) 5% ABV 1.4 units	 Spirits single (25ml) 40% ABV 1 unit

#### Sensible limits:

**Men & Women:** No more than 2-3 units a day and no more than 14 units in a week.

**Everyone needs at least 3 days a week without alcohol. Older people may need 4 days per week.**

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For any advice, information or support, please contact With You Cornwall:

**we are  
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Telephone 0333 2000 325 (available 24 hours)

Website: <https://www.wearewithyou.org.uk/>

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### Enjoying Alcohol Responsibly: Advice for older people

Older people drink alcohol for the same reasons as younger people: relaxation, celebration, & enjoyment.

However, as we grow older, we may face different risks, and we may need to learn new patterns of sensible drinking.

This is because our bodies work less efficiently in later life, and alcohol will probably affect us differently and more quickly.

In particular, older people's livers and kidneys can tend to function more slowly e.g. at filtering alcohol from the bloodstream, so alcohol may affect the brain and liver for longer.

**This leaflet contains advice to keep you safe if you drink alcohol.**

**Ways that alcohol might affect you:**

Alcohol can aggravate various other health problems that affect older people:  
e.g. **high blood pressure, digestion, circulation.**

Alcohol may contribute to **confusion and short-term memory loss.** This can lead to hazards such as leaving the gas on, forgetting to lock the door, or having a fall.

Alcohol may increase the risk of **accidents or falls,** especially if someone is frail or unsteady.

Alcohol can increase the likelihood of **incontinence,** needing the toilet more often, or just forgetting to go in time.

Alcohol slows reactions and can make people feel depressed, or become aggressive or morose. This is because **alcohol affects our self-control, so we sometimes show how we are feeling in a more extreme way than when we are not affected by drinking.**

There is very little food value in alcoholic drinks and people who drink instead of eating may suffer from **malnutrition.** It is very important to eat enough nourishing food.

Bad habits with alcohol may lead to an increase in **financial problems,** especially if money is already a struggle.

Alcohol does not warm the body, it cools it down. This means that people who feel cold should not drink alcohol, and no-one suffering from **hypothermia** should ever be given it.

**Medication should not be mixed with alcohol.**

Ask your doctor or pharmacist if it is safe to drink alcohol with any medicine you are taking.

**Some situations may increase the risk of harm from alcohol:**

For example, after **bereavements,** when people may lose confidence or become isolated and lonely, or when **suffering from chronic pain, disability or insomnia.**

These situations can lead to the temptation to use alcohol to self-medicate, trying to escape temporarily from negative experiences and feelings.

Although alcohol may seem to offer relief in the short term, in reality it often makes the problems worse, or damages someone's ability to come to terms with or find solutions to difficult or distressing phases of life.

Rather than solving problems or relieving stress, alcohol could become a harmful habit, leading people to believe that they can't cope without it.

**To avoid problems developing, it's wise to observe a few basic rules:**

- 1: Have at least 3-4 alcohol free days per week.
- 2: Limit drinking to 4 units maximum for men, and 2 units maximum for women, per session.
- 3: Don't mix alcohol & medication or drugs.
- 4: Don't drink and drive.
- 5: Avoid drinking on an empty stomach.
- 6: Consider diluting spirits and sip your drinks slowly, rather than gulping them down.

Finally,

- 7: Never drink *because* you're feeling low.  
**Instead, ask for help.**

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**If you're caring for an older person:**

If an older person in your care appears confused and their co-ordination seems to be deteriorating, get an expert diagnosis.

Sometimes alcohol problems are overlooked or wrongly assumed to be senile dementia.

In addition, Diabetes or Parkinson's Disease can occasionally go undiagnosed because a person is known to enjoy a drink.

Try to be aware of the risks alcohol can cause an older person, as outlined in this leaflet, but don't jump to conclusions! Alcohol can remain an enjoyable and legitimate part of an older person's life, just as for anyone else.

**Remember to look after yourself as well.**

Carers themselves may become overtired or anxious, and may be at risk of drinking to relieve stress.

It is important to look after your own health and to seek help and support sooner rather than later, whether alcohol or anything else is starting to cause you problems.

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