

# Alcohol and men

Newspapers often run stories, and photos, about young women binge drinking. Many people still see male over-drinking as more socially acceptable.

Yet drinking too much alcohol is a huge issue for men.

In Great Britain, two out of every five men (40%) drink more than the recommended daily limit of four units at least once a week. A quarter (23%) drink twice the recommended limit – the definition of binge drinking.<sup>(1)</sup>

A quarter of deaths in men aged under 34 can be attributed to alcohol, so if you thought alcohol only caused health problems later in life, you'd be mistaken.<sup>(2)</sup>

## FACTS and FIGURES

It is true that men can hold their drink better than women. That's because men generally weigh more than women and therefore have more tissue to absorb alcohol. Men also have higher levels of alcohol dehydrogenase (AHD), the chemical that metabolises alcohol in their liver, so their body can deal with alcohol quicker.

But many men remain unaware of the long-term risks of drinking too much alcohol. Only a third (36%) are aware of the link between alcohol and some forms of cancer (including breast, bowel, kidney, mouth and oesophageal cancers). While awareness among women rose from 35% to 42% last year, the figure for men remained unchanged.<sup>(3)</sup>

One in five men develop a drinking problem. Men are twice as likely as women to abuse or become dependent on alcohol.<sup>(4)</sup> One in 10 men (9%) are "harmful" drinkers – someone who drinks more than 50 units a week.<sup>(5)</sup>

## PROGRESSION

Drinking too much alcohol has specific health implications for men.

**Beer belly:** It is a myth that beer goes straight to your stomach. A 2003 study by British researchers from University College London looked at the link between the amount of beer 2,000 Czechs drank (Czechs are some of the world's biggest beer drinkers) and the size of their stomachs. They found no link.<sup>(6)</sup> But that doesn't mean that it won't make you put on weight in other parts of your body: alcohol is packed with calories. Men's favourites – beer and cider – are the worst; a pint of either usually has between 200 and 300 calories – that's equivalent to a bar of chocolate.

**Fertility and impotence:** Alcohol can reduce male fertility by lowering sperm counts and testosterone levels. One in 10 (11%) doctors blame low male fertility on alcohol.<sup>(7)</sup> More than three-quarters (80%) of men who drink heavily are believed to experience serious sexual side effects, including impotence, sterility, or loss of sexual desire.<sup>(8)</sup> Men's sexual performance will be harmed if they regularly drink more than recommended units. In the long term, they can have difficulty getting an erection.<sup>(9)</sup>

**Appearance:** Excessive long-term drinking in men causes withering away of the testicles, enlargement of the breasts and loss of hair on the body.<sup>(10)</sup> Heavy drinking can also worsen skin disorders like rosacea which causes the blood vessels in the face to expand, making your face permanently redder. It can also cause inflamed red bumps and pus spots.<sup>(11)</sup>

**Gout:** An arthritic condition that causes inflammation, swelling and pain in your joints. Gout is most common in men aged 30 to 60 and is linked to drinking alcohol. A large scale study conducted at a hospital in Massachusetts, in the United States, in 2004 tracked the lifestyles of 47,150 men without gout over 12 years to see if they would develop the condition. The 730 men who did get gout drank more than those who didn't.<sup>(12)</sup>

More generally, because alcohol is a depressant, **it slows down the brain** and affects the body's responses. Drinking just a bit more than you should over time can seriously **harm your liver**. Binge drinking especially is a risk factor in developing **heart disease** and alcohol is **the leading cause of throat and mouth cancer**, second only to tobacco. It's also linked to **bowel and liver cancer**.

Drinking too much can also cause **bone disease**, **your pancreas to become inflamed**, your stomach to become irritated and **type 2 diabetes**. Finally, it's linked to **anxiety and depression**.

## ADVICE and GUIDANCE

Health experts recommend that **men should not drink more than three to four units a day** – equivalent to about a pint and a half of ordinary strength beer, or a couple of small glasses of wine. They also recommend giving your liver a break – don't drink every day.

If you are worried that alcohol could be affecting your physical or mental health, visit your GP. They can run tests, offer advice and support, or refer you to an appropriate specialist.

You can also call **Drinkline**, the national 24-hour helpline, on **0800 917 82 82**, or find further information on the Drinkaware website at **www.drinkaware.co.uk**.

## LINKS

### Men's Health Forum

An organisation working to improve men's health and wellbeing in England and Wales. Information about the forum can be found at **www.menshealthforum.org.uk**. MHF also runs consumer health site at **www.malehealth.co.uk**.

### References

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