

Alcohol and depression factsheet

Most people in Scotland drink alcohol. Many say that it helps them to relax and feel more sociable and confident. This is the same for people whether or not they have depression. When you're feeling low or depressed, it might seem that alcohol lifts your mood to feel more like your old self and helps you to cope with life. These feelings are not long lasting, and research has shown there to be a significant connection between alcohol and depression. While it won't be a problem for everyone, it is good to be aware of how alcohol might be affecting your mental health.

What are the links between alcohol and depression?

Problems with alcohol can affect you at all stages of life whether you are young, middle aged or in later life. It's easy to become trapped in a cycle of drinking to relieve your feelings of depression and anxiety but:

- People who drink a lot have been found to be more likely to have depression and heavy drinking is more common in those with depression.
- The same is true for anxiety – anxious people may drink more and drinking a lot can lead people who are not normally affected by anxiety to experience these symptoms.
- Drinking affects your sleep. Alcohol actually causes you to have a lighter sleep, so you may wake more in the night. Sleep disturbances are also common in people with depression and drinking can make these worse.
- Self-harm and suicide are much more common in people who drink a lot. As many as 65% of suicides have been linked to heavy drinking, while almost a third of suicides among young people are committed when the person has been drinking. Drinking a lot can make you more impulsive and likely to act on thoughts of self-harm or suicide.
- Drinking heavily can often have an effect on relationships, work and self-esteem. It may also contribute to stresses such as debt, accidents, violence and involvement with the law.

How does alcohol affect my mood?

Using alcohol to regulate your mood can cause problems because alcohol can have a depressive effect. Things that can affect your emotional state when drinking include how you feel before you start drinking, whether you drink alone or with others, what you expect the effect to be, and of course, the amount you consume.

Alcohol affects many different parts of your brain. Despite what many people think, drinking a lot dulls the 'feel good' systems in your brain. This means you need to drink more for the same effects. Low mood and unpleasant feelings on stopping drinking are also more common if you have been drinking heavily. This can lead to a vicious circle where you drink to block out the unpleasant feelings leading you to drink even more.

Alcohol and anti-depressant medication

If you are taking anti-depressants, it is best to talk to your GP or pharmacist about the effect of alcohol on your medication. Generally people on medication are advised not to drink alcohol, except in small amounts, because of the following risks:

- Alcohol can counteract the potential benefits of the prescribed anti-depressant drug.
- Some anti-depressants also have a sedative effect and alcohol will increase this sedative effect. This increases drowsiness and the likelihood of accidents.
- The combination of drinking and taking medication may put a strain on your liver.

Low risk limits for alcohol consumption

Men: No more than 3-4 units a day and no more than 21 units in a week.

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

We all need at least 2 days a week without alcohol. Doctors agree that drinking more than the sensible limit damages health in the short and long term. Heavy drinking increases your risk of being affected by depression or anxiety.

When should I think about cutting down?

Not everyone who has depression and who drinks will have a problem with alcohol. But if you are regularly drinking over the low risk limits, it is a good idea to cut down. Particular danger signs to look out for are drinking more and using alcohol to block out your feelings, taking time off work because of hangovers, being criticised by family or friends because of your drinking, or drinking to 'cure' a hangover. Using alcohol as a coping strategy to get through the day is another danger sign.

People who have depression who are also drinking a lot should notice an improvement in their mood after a few weeks of cutting down or stopping drinking. If you are drinking heavily, you should seek medical advice as there can be health issues if you stop suddenly. Your GP can give you advice and support.

For more information and support...

Alcohol Focus Scotland

Tel: 0141 572 6700 or visit www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk

Action on Depression

Email: info@actionondepression.org or visit www.actionondepression.org

Drinkline	0800 7 314 314
Breathing Space	0800 83 85 87
Samaritans	08457 909090