

Let's Talk...

Alcohol

LET'S
TALK
GUTS

Alcohol travels through your whole digestive system, meaning it can cause irritation and damage from top to bottom. Although you might think that alcohol only impacts your liver, it can impact every single part of your gut, from your oesophagus (gullet) to your bowels.

What is the recommended alcohol intake?

In the UK, many of us are regularly drinking at levels that increase our risk of health problems, often without even realising it. The recommended alcohol intake is no more than 14 units per week on a regular basis. To keep your health risks low, it's best to spread these units evenly over three or more days, rather than saving them up for a heavy drinking session.

14
units



or



**No more than
six pints of
beer per week**

**No more than
seven glasses of
wine per week**

Alcohol can be an enjoyable part of socialising, but cutting back or reducing your intake is a vital step in looking after your digestive health. Make sure you have several drink-free days every week to allow your digestive system time to recover.

Please note, this information is for people without a diagnosed digestive condition, for general health and lifestyle awareness. If you live with a digestive condition and need information about drinking alcohol, please speak to your healthcare team.

How does alcohol affect your digestive system?

Because alcohol is absorbed directly through your stomach and small intestine before being processed by your liver, it affects every part of your digestive system. When you consume an alcoholic drink, it acts as a toxic irritant.

Here is how it can affect specific sections of your gut:

The throat

In the larynx, a part of the throat, long-term alcohol use carries a cancer risk, particularly in those who smoke cigarettes. Alcohol can also be a factor in other types of head and neck cancers, including mouth cancer.

The oesophagus and stomach

Alcohol relaxes the ring of muscle at the bottom of your gullet (the lower oesophageal sphincter), allowing stomach acid to creep back up and cause heartburn or reflux. It also irritates the lining of your stomach, causing inflammation (gastritis), altering acid production and increasing the long-term risk of stomach and oesophageal cancers.

The bowels

Alcohol can speed up the time it takes for food to pass through your system. This is why many people experience loose poo or diarrhoea after a night of drinking. In the small bowel, it can cause painful inflammation (duodenitis) or ulcers. Your gut bacteria can also change alcohol into other substances that increase the risk of bowel cancer.

The liver and pancreas

Your liver can only process about one unit (10ml) of alcohol per hour. Heavy or regular drinking overworks it, making alcohol the leading cause of death from liver disease in the UK. Excessive drinking is also the second most common cause of acute and the most common cause of chronic pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas). This could impair your body's ability to produce digestive enzymes.



Want to learn more?

We provide information and support on more than 40 digestive conditions and symptoms, as well as health and lifestyle. Go to gutscharity.org.uk/information to discover more.



Five top tips for reducing your alcohol intake

1. Explore the no alcohol and low alcohol options

The market for non-alcoholic and low-alcohol beverages has exploded, and there are plenty of great options available. Try swapping your usual beer, wine, or spirit for an alcohol-free alternative (0.0% to 0.5% ABV). They allow you to enjoy a drink socially without the digestive irritation.

2. Switch to lower-strength drinks

When you choose to drink, check the percentage volume (ABV). Opting for lighter beers (under 4% ABV) or swapping a strong red wine for a lower-strength white or rosé can significantly reduce the total units you consume over an evening.

3. Implement the spacer rule

Alternate every alcoholic drink with a non-alcoholic spacer, such as a glass of water, soda water with lime, or a soft drink. This naturally slows down your drinking pace, keeps you hydrated, and gives your liver a chance to catch up.

4. Wine and dine

Make it a rule to only have your first alcoholic drink once your evening meal is served. Eating food slows down the rate at which alcohol is absorbed into your bloodstream, protecting your stomach lining from direct irritation.

5. Establish clear drink-free days

Aim for at least three or four consecutive drink-free days every week. Use the NHS Drink Free Days app or a simple calendar to track your progress and break down the automatic habit of reaching for a drink after a stressful day.



Good to know: Alcohol can cause sudden changes to your bowel habits, such as diarrhoea, and can heavily trigger acid reflux. It's normal for these digestive symptoms to improve significantly within just a few weeks of cutting back. It's important to discuss any persistent changes with your doctor.

When should I seek urgent medical help for drinking alcohol?

Symptoms to get checked immediately:



- Yellowing of the eyes or skin (jaundice).
- Abdominal swelling.
- Vomiting blood.
- Passing black, tarry poo.



If you are experiencing any of these, it is important to seek medical advice immediately by calling 999.

Look after yourself safely:

If you drink excessively, stopping cold turkey can be dangerous for your health. If your body has become dependent on alcohol, you might experience severe shaking, sweating, or extreme anxiety when you stop. If you need support to stop drinking alcohol, reach out to a healthcare professional or call Drinkline on 0300 123 1110 for safe, friendly support.

A gutsy tip: Rethinking your evening routine

If reaching for a glass of wine has become your automatic way to unwind after a long day, try swapping it out for a delicious mocktail or a non-alcoholic spirit. Your gut will thank you for it!



Want to know more about alcohol, health and lifestyle?

Guts UK is the national charity for the digestive system. We provide information and support on more than 40 digestive conditions and symptoms, as well as health and lifestyle. Find more information at gutscharity.org.uk/information.

Need support? Contact our Helpline on 0300 102 4887 or gutscharity.org.uk/helpline.

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