

# HIV & ALCOHOL: FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH, OR AT RISK, OF HIV

## SENSIBLE DRINKING

Most people enjoy drinking alcohol socially and responsibly without putting their health at risk. Drinking in moderation can help us relax and is part of a healthy lifestyle. Some research shows that drinking in moderation can have positive health benefits.

## TIPS FOR DRINKING SENSIBLY

To maintain sensible drinking levels, have some days free from drinking alcohol. It is recommended having at least two alcohol free days each week. However, abstaining on one day should not mean drinking in excess on another.

- Try to drink slowly and not mix your drinks.
- Eat a meal or snack before drinking.
- Never mix drinks with drugs.
- Remember that the alcohol measures you pour at home will often be larger than a normal pub measure.
- Alternate an alcoholic drink with a soft drink if you are on a night out.



## ALCOHOL AND HIV

There is a link between excessive alcohol use and the risk of becoming infected with HIV as a result of unsafe sex. People who drink excessive amounts of alcohol are more likely than the general population to contract HIV as a result of not using protection (ie a condom). Similarly people with HIV are more likely to overindulge in alcohol at some point during their lives. Excessive use of alcohol is associated with high risk sexual behaviour which frequently results in unsafe sex.

## DRINKING AND SAFER SEX

Alcohol consumption can also reduce our ability to make informed choices around safer sex and protection from HIV infection and adherence to ART (Antiretroviral Therapy) medication. The effects of alcohol are known to affect our state of mind leading to confusion and heavy alcohol use has been shown to cause damage to the body's immune system. Prolonged and excessive use of alcohol can also result in a range of health consequences which can result in a deterioration of health in someone with HIV.

While drinking too much alcohol can increase confidence it can also cloud our judgement and cause problems for safer sex through losing our inhibitions and increased risk taking. There is additional risk in not considering the consequences and a tendency to forget safer sex messages. People who drink too much alcohol are more likely to have sex at an earlier age, more sexual partners, and unprotected sex.

## DRINKING AND RISKY SEX

More than half of all cases of sexually transmitted infections (STI's) are transmitted because sexual partners are drunk. If you are having sex with someone always use a condom and if you are having anal sex, use water-based lube.

It can take only one unprotected sexual episode with someone to contract a sexually transmitted infection. Condom use can prevent sexually transmitted infections.

## ALCOHOL, HEALTH AND WELLBEING

If you are living with HIV, dependence and excessive use of alcohol can weaken your adherence to antiretroviral treatment by damaging your immune system and slow down recovery from infections. Some studies have shown that over indulgence and dependence on alcohol actually increases the risk of disease progression. If you are living with HIV it is advisable not to drink alcohol while you are taking your medication as this can result in unpleasant side effects. If you have hepatitis B or C, it is recommended that you limit your intake of alcohol.

## UNITS OF ALCOHOL

Drinks are measured in units of alcohol. One unit of alcohol is about equal to half a pint of ordinary strength beer, lager or cider (3-4% alcohol by volume), a standard 175ml glass of wine or a 25ml measure of spirit. Most alcohol drink manufacturers state the amount of units of alcohol in relation to percentages on their bottle and can labels.

Remember that units of alcohol vary according to the size and strength of your drink. Studies have shown that most people underestimate the number of units in a drink. Drinking beyond the recommended limits is putting your health at risk.

## DAILY RECOMMENDED LIMITS AND UNITS OF ALCOHOL

For men the daily recommended limit is 3/4 units per day, equivalent to a pint and a half of 4% beer. Men should drink no more than 21 units of alcohol per week. For women the daily recommended limit is 2/3 units per day, equivalent to a 175ml glass of 13% wine.

Women should drink no more than 14 units of alcohol per week. Drinking above these recommended limits is hazardous and puts your health at risk.

## HARMFUL DRINKING

Consuming 35 units for a woman and 50 units a week for a man is considered to be harmful drinking. Individuals who consume these amounts are likely to experience alcohol related harm.

## BINGE DRINKING

Binge drinking means drinking heavily and quickly to get drunk or feel the effects of alcohol. If you are a man who drinks more than 8 units of alcohol, about 3 pints of strong beer a day, or a women who drinks more than 2/3 units a glass of wine per day then you are putting your health at risk. People who binge drink are at risk of harm to their physical and mental health and wellbeing. In recent years binge drinking has become an increasing problem in Scotland.

## GETTING HELP

Your doctor can advise you about alcohol and refer you to a service for help with an alcohol problem. Your local health centre may also be able to provide advice and support. The following agencies websites provide information and advice on the effects of alcohol and support groups for people who are finding they can't control their alcohol intake. Drinkaware (see link below) produce a unit calculator, useful for calculating the number of units in alcoholic drinks.

- HIV Scotland** – [www.hivscotland.com](http://www.hivscotland.com)
- Alcohol Concern Drinkline** – 0800 917 828 [www.alcoholconcern.org.uk](http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk)
- Alcohol Focus Scotland** – 0141 572 6700 [www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk/gettinghelp](http://www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk/gettinghelp)
- Drinkwise** – [www.drinkwise.susu.org](http://www.drinkwise.susu.org)
- Drinkaware** – [www.drinkawaretrust.org.uk](http://www.drinkawaretrust.org.uk)
- Sexual Health Helpline** – 0800 567123 (24 hours)
- Sandyford** – 0141 211 8130 [www.sandyford.org](http://www.sandyford.org)

