

The facts about...

Alcohol and **Pancreatitis**

**Five key
things you
need to
know**

for the facts
drinkaware.co.uk

You probably don't pay much attention to your pancreas. But that small, tadpole-shaped organ behind your stomach and below your ribcage is pretty important.

It produces two essential substances: digestive juices which your intestines use to break down food, and hormones that are involved in digestion, such as insulin, which regulates your blood sugar levels.

Pancreatitis is when your pancreas becomes inflamed and its cells are damaged. Heavy drinking can cause pancreatitis. But if you drink within the government's guidelines you can avoid upsetting this important organ.

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There are two types of pancreatitis: acute and chronic

Acute pancreatitis

Most cases of acute pancreatitis come on pretty quickly. The pancreas becomes inflamed but it only stays that way for a few days and there isn't usually any permanent damage. However, one in five cases of acute pancreatitis are severe. Enzymes from your pancreas can get in your blood stream and lead to more serious conditions like kidney failure.

Acute pancreatitis is an uncommon condition. In England, it is estimated that around one in every 2,500 people will develop it in any given year.¹

Symptoms include:

- **Abdominal pain, just behind the ribs and spreading through the back**
- **Nausea**
- **Vomiting**
- **Fever**

Chronic pancreatitis

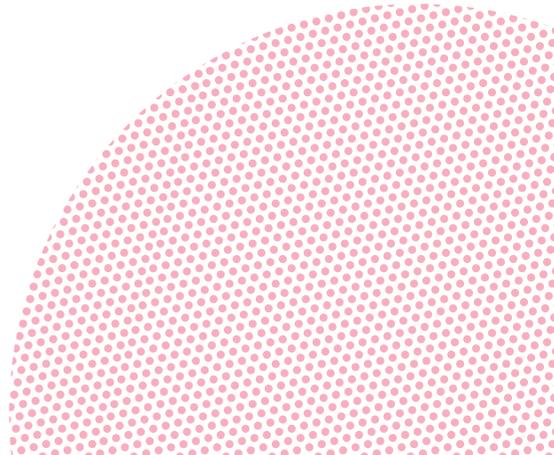
Chronic pancreatitis is where the pancreas becomes inflamed and stays that way, causing it to stop working properly. It isn't a common condition – around one new case is diagnosed for every 11,000 people in England each year.²

Symptoms include:

- **Recurring, severe pain behind the ribs and through the back**
- **Weight loss**
- **Diarrhoea**
- **Producing greasy, foul-smelling faeces**
- **Back pain**
- **Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes)**

¹ NHS Choices website, Pancreatitis, acute. Available at <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Pancreatitis/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

² NHS Choices website, Pancreatitis, chronic. Available at <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Pancreatitis-chronic/Pages/Introduction.aspx>



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Both types of pancreatitis can be caused by heavy drinking

If you drink regularly, you increase your risk of developing pancreatitis.

Acute

Scientists aren't sure exactly how alcohol causes the condition. One theory is that the molecules in alcohol interfere with the cells of the pancreas, stopping them working properly. Whatever the cause, there is a clear link between drinking alcohol and acute pancreatitis – and the more alcohol you drink, the higher your risk of developing the condition.³

Chronic

You're more likely to have repeated episodes of acute pancreatitis when you drink heavily. Over time, this will cause permanent damage to your pancreas, causing chronic pancreatitis.

And it's worse if you smoke. Cigarettes are thought to increase the harmful effects of alcohol on the pancreas.

Gallstones (small stones, usually made of cholesterol that form in the gallbladder) are another major cause of both types of pancreatitis.



Long-term alcohol misuse is responsible for around 7 in every 10 cases of chronic pancreatitis.

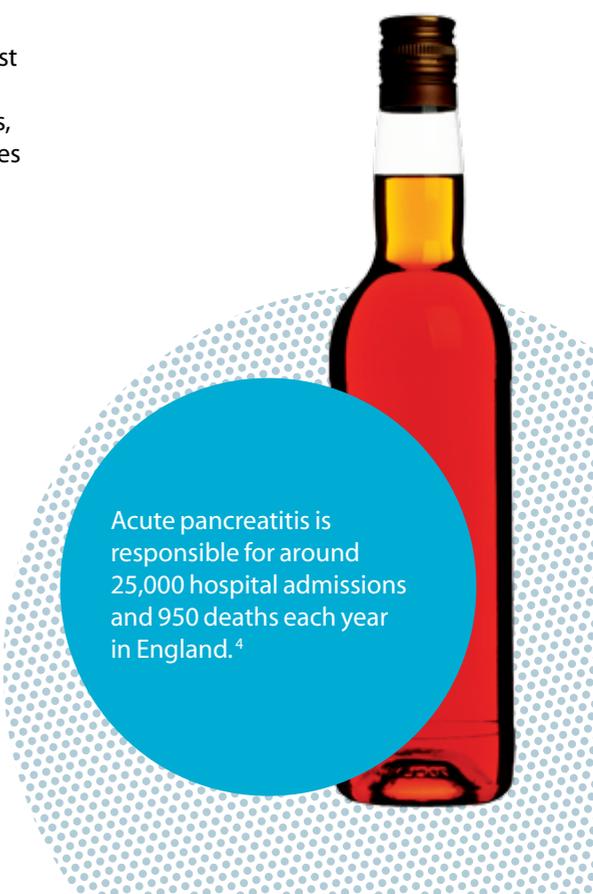
³ NHS Choices website, Pancreatitis, acute - causes. Available at www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Pancreatitis/Pages/Causes.aspx

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Damage from chronic pancreatitis can be irreversible

If you're diagnosed with acute pancreatitis, you should stop drinking and eat a low fat diet. This will reduce your risk of another attack and of developing chronic pancreatitis.

If you develop chronic pancreatitis your pancreas will stop working properly. The outlook for most cases of chronic pancreatitis is not good. The damage is irreversible and you'll need to go on permanent medication to help you digest food and to maintain blood sugar levels. It's a painful condition, but in many cases, after years of treatment the pain improves or sometimes disappears.



Acute pancreatitis is responsible for around 25,000 hospital admissions and 950 deaths each year in England.⁴

⁴ NHS Choices website, Pancreatitis, acute. Available at <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Pancreatitis/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

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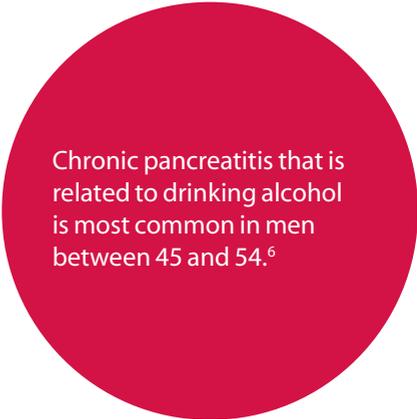
Chronic pancreatitis can put you at risk of other illness, including diabetes and cancer⁵

Around half of people with chronic pancreatitis develop diabetes. This is because the damaged pancreas cannot make insulin (which you need to regulate your blood sugar). It usually happens years after the pancreatitis diagnosis. In fact, it's not unusual for 20 years to go by before diabetes occurs.

Pseudocysts are another common complication of chronic pancreatitis. These are sacs of fluid that develop on the surface of the pancreas. In many cases, they don't cause any symptoms and will only be found if you have a computerised tomography (CT) scan. However, in some people pseudocysts can cause bloating, indigestion and abdominal pain. They affect around one in four people with chronic pancreatitis.

Chronic pancreatitis also increases your risk of developing pancreatic cancer.

Like any health condition that causes you to be in a lot of pain, chronic pancreatitis can affect you emotionally and harm your mental health.



Chronic pancreatitis that is related to drinking alcohol is most common in men between 45 and 54.⁶

⁵ NHS Choices website, Pancreatitis, chronic - complications. Available at <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Pancreatitis-chronic/Pages/Complications.aspx>

⁶ NHS Choices website, Pancreatitis, chronic. Available at <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Pancreatitis-chronic/Pages/Introduction.aspxrisks-and-causes#alcohol>

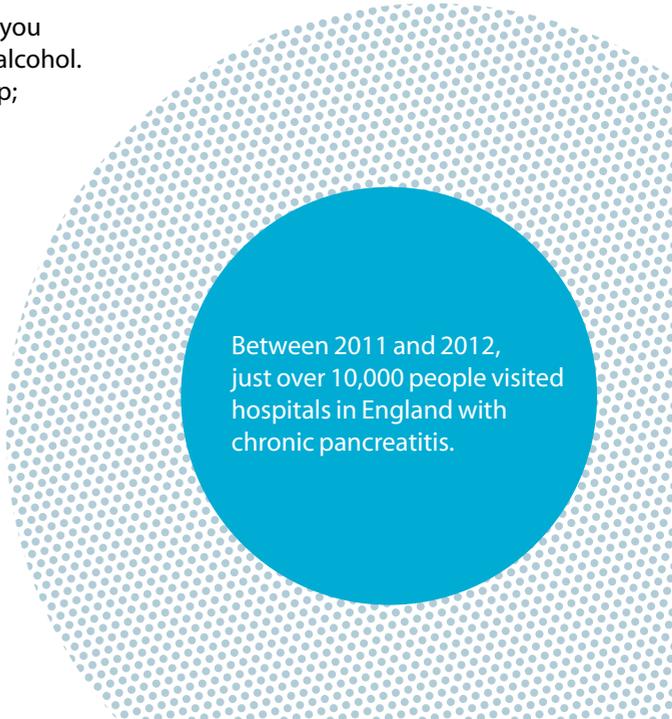
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If you stop drinking, you improve your chances of recovering from pancreatitis

If you're diagnosed with chronic pancreatitis, the most important thing you can do is to stop drinking alcohol. This should help with the pain, and stop your pancreas being damaged even more. If you carry on drinking, you're likely to experience huge amounts of pain. Worse still, you're three times more likely to die from complications of the condition.

With acute pancreatitis, even if it's not been caused by alcohol, you should avoid drinking completely for at least six months. You need to give your pancreas time to recover.

If you find it hard to stop drinking, you may have become dependent on alcohol. There's support to help you give up; start by talking to your GP.



Between 2011 and 2012, just over 10,000 people visited hospitals in England with chronic pancreatitis.

Staying in control

The government advises that people should not regularly drink more than the daily unit guidelines of 3–4 units of alcohol for men (equivalent to a pint and a half of 4% beer) and 2–3 units of alcohol for women (equivalent to a 175 ml glass of 13% wine). 'Regularly' means drinking every day or most days of the week.



Here are three ways you can cut back and keep your drinking under control:

A Keep track of what you're drinking.
The MyDrinkaware drinks calculator helps track your drinking and gives personalised tips for cutting back - visit [drinkaware.co.uk](https://www.drinkaware.co.uk) to start using it.

B Know your strength.
Alcoholic drinks labels will have the abbreviation 'ABV' which stands for Alcohol By Volume, or sometimes just the word 'vol'. It shows the percentage of your drink that's pure alcohol. This can vary a lot. For example, some ales are 3.5%, some stronger lagers can be as much as 6% ABV. This means that just one pint of strong lager can be more than three units of alcohol, so you need to keep your eye on what you're drinking.

C Give alcohol-free days a go.
Many medical experts recommend taking regular days off from drinking to ensure you don't become addicted to alcohol.

We've got the answers at **drinkaware.co.uk**

Advice

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Further information

For the facts on alcohol and to keep track of your units through our MyDrinkaware tool, visit the Drinkaware website drinkaware.co.uk

Your GP can help you figure out if you should make any changes in your drinking, and offer help and advice along the way.

If you're concerned about someone's drinking, or your own, Drinkline runs a free, confidential helpline. Call 0800 917 8282.

Pancreatitis Support Network has information and support, including discussion forums at www.pancreatitis.org.uk

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