

The facts about...

# Alcohol and **mental health**



**Five key  
things you  
need to  
know**

for the facts  
**drinkaware.co.uk**

**We often reach for a drink because we want to change the way we feel. Maybe we want to relax, to celebrate or simply forget our day at work. More concerning is that many people drink to try and mask anxiety or depression, or other mental health problems.**

While alcohol can have a very temporary positive impact on our mood, in the long term alcohol misuse can cause big problems for our mental health. It's linked to a range of issues from depression and memory loss to suicide.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Singleton N, Bumpstead R, O'Brien M, Lee A, Meltzer H (2001) Psychiatric morbidity among adults living in private households, 2000. Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO): London.

1

## Alcohol alters your brain chemistry

Our brains rely on a delicate balance of chemicals and processes. Alcohol is a depressant, which means it can disrupt that balance, affecting our thoughts, feelings and actions – and sometimes our long-term mental health. This is partly down to ‘neurotransmitters’, chemicals that help to transmit signals from one nerve (or neuron) in the brain to another.

The relaxed feeling you can get when you have that first drink is due to the chemical changes alcohol has caused in your brain.

For many of us, a drink can help us feel more confident and less anxious. That’s because it’s starting to depress the part of the brain we associate with inhibition.

But, as you drink more, more of the brain starts to be affected. It doesn’t matter what mood you’re in to start with, when high levels of alcohol are involved, instead of pleasurable effects increasing, it’s possible that a negative emotional response will take over. You could become angry, aggressive, anxious or depressed.

Heavy drinking carries a high risk of developing long-term health harms. This is defined as regularly drinking more than six units a day or 35 units a week for women, and more than eight units a day or 50 units a week for men.



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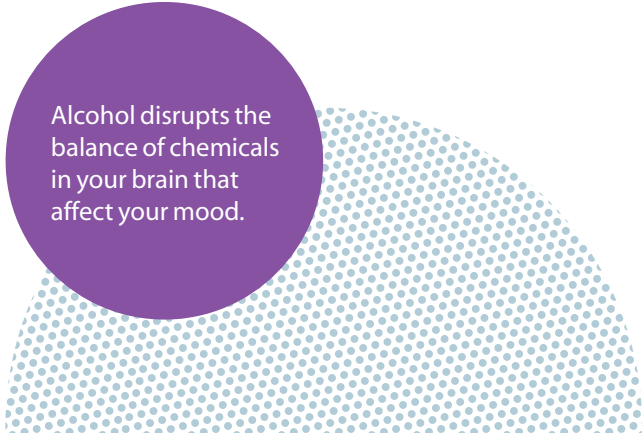
## Alcohol can actually increase anxiety and stress rather than reduce it

Unfortunately reaching for a drink won't always have the effect you're after.

While a glass of wine after a hard day might help you relax, in the long run it can contribute to feelings of depression and anxiety and make stress harder to deal with. This is because regular, heavy drinking interferes with neurotransmitters in our brains that are needed for good mental health.

When we drink, we narrow our perception of a situation and don't always respond to all the cues around us. If we're prone to anxiety and notice something that could be interpreted as threatening in the environment, we'll hone in on that and miss the other less threatening or neutral information.

For example, we might focus on our partner talking to someone we're jealous of, rather than notice all the other people they've been chatting to that evening.



Alcohol disrupts the balance of chemicals in your brain that affect your mood.

3

## Alcohol + depression = a vicious cycle

If you drink heavily and regularly you're likely to develop some symptoms of depression. It's that good old brain chemistry at work again. Regular drinking lowers the levels of serotonin in your brain – a chemical that helps to regulate your mood.

In Britain, people who experience anxiety or depression are twice as likely to be heavy or problem drinkers. For some people, the anxiety or depression came first and they've reached for alcohol to try to relieve it. For others, drinking came first, so it may be a root cause of their anxieties.<sup>2</sup>

Drinking heavily can also affect your relationships with your partner, family and friends. It can impact on your performance at work. These issues can also contribute to depression.

If you use drink to try and improve your mood or mask your depression, you may be starting a vicious cycle...

Warning signs that alcohol is affecting your mood include:

- **disturbed sleep**
- **feeling lethargic and tired all the time**
- **low moods**
- **experiencing anxiety in situations where you would normally feel comfortable**



Anxiety and depression are more common in heavy drinkers – heavy drinking is more common in those with anxiety and depression.

<sup>2</sup> Singleton N, Bumpstead R, O'Brien M, Lee A, Meltzer H (2001) Psychiatric morbidity among adults living in private households, 2000. Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO): London.

4

## Alcohol is linked to suicide, self-harm and psychosis

Alcohol can make people lose their inhibitions and behave impulsively, so it can lead to actions they might not otherwise have taken – including self-harm and suicide.<sup>3</sup>

According to the NHS in Scotland, more than half of people who ended up in hospital because they'd deliberately injured themselves said they've drunk alcohol immediately before or while doing it. 27% of men and 19% of women gave alcohol as the reason for self-harming.<sup>4</sup>

Extreme levels of drinking (such as more than 30 units per day for several weeks) can occasionally cause 'psychosis'. It's a severe mental illness where hallucinations and delusions of persecution develop. Psychotic symptoms can also occur when very heavy drinkers suddenly stop drinking and develop a condition known as 'delirium tremens' – symptoms include body tremours and confusion.



<sup>3</sup> Singleton N, Bumpstead R, O'Brien M, Lee A, Meltzer H (2001) Psychiatric morbidity among adults living in private households, 2000. Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO): London.

<sup>4</sup> NHS Quality improvement Scotland, Understanding alcohol misuse in Scotland: Harmful drinking three – alcohol and self-harm' 2007. Available at [http://www.healthcareimprovementscotland.org/programmes/mental\\_health/programme\\_resources/harmful\\_drinking\\_3.aspx](http://www.healthcareimprovementscotland.org/programmes/mental_health/programme_resources/harmful_drinking_3.aspx)

5

## Alcohol can damage your memory

Soon after drinking alcohol, your brain processes slow down and your memory can be impaired. After large quantities of alcohol, the brain can stop recording into the 'memory store'. That's why you can wake up the next day with a 'blank' about what you said or did and even where you were. This short-term memory failure or 'black out' doesn't mean that brain cells have been damaged, but frequent heavy sessions can damage the brain because of alcohol's effect on brain chemistry and processes.

Drinking heavily over a long period of time can also have long-term effects on memory. Even on days when you don't drink any alcohol, recalling what you did yesterday, or even where you have been earlier that day, become difficult.



## 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 Try alternative ways to deal with stress.**

Instead of reaching for a beer or glass of wine after a hard day, go for a run, swim or to a yoga class, or talk to a friend about what's worrying you.

**B Keep track of what you're drinking.**

Your liver can't tell you if you're drinking too much, but the MyDrinkaware drinks calculator can. It can even help you cut down. Visit [Drinkaware.co.uk](https://www.drinkaware.co.uk)

**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.

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

## Advice

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## Other useful contacts

For the facts on alcohol and to keep track of your units through our MyDrinkaware tool, visit the Drinkaware website [www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk)

Your GP can help you figure out if you should make any changes to your drinking, and offer help and advice.

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

Samaritans provides confidential non-judgemental emotional support, 24 hours a day for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including those which could lead to suicide. You can ring them on 08457 90 90 90 or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org) (they try their hardest to get back to you within 24 hours). [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

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