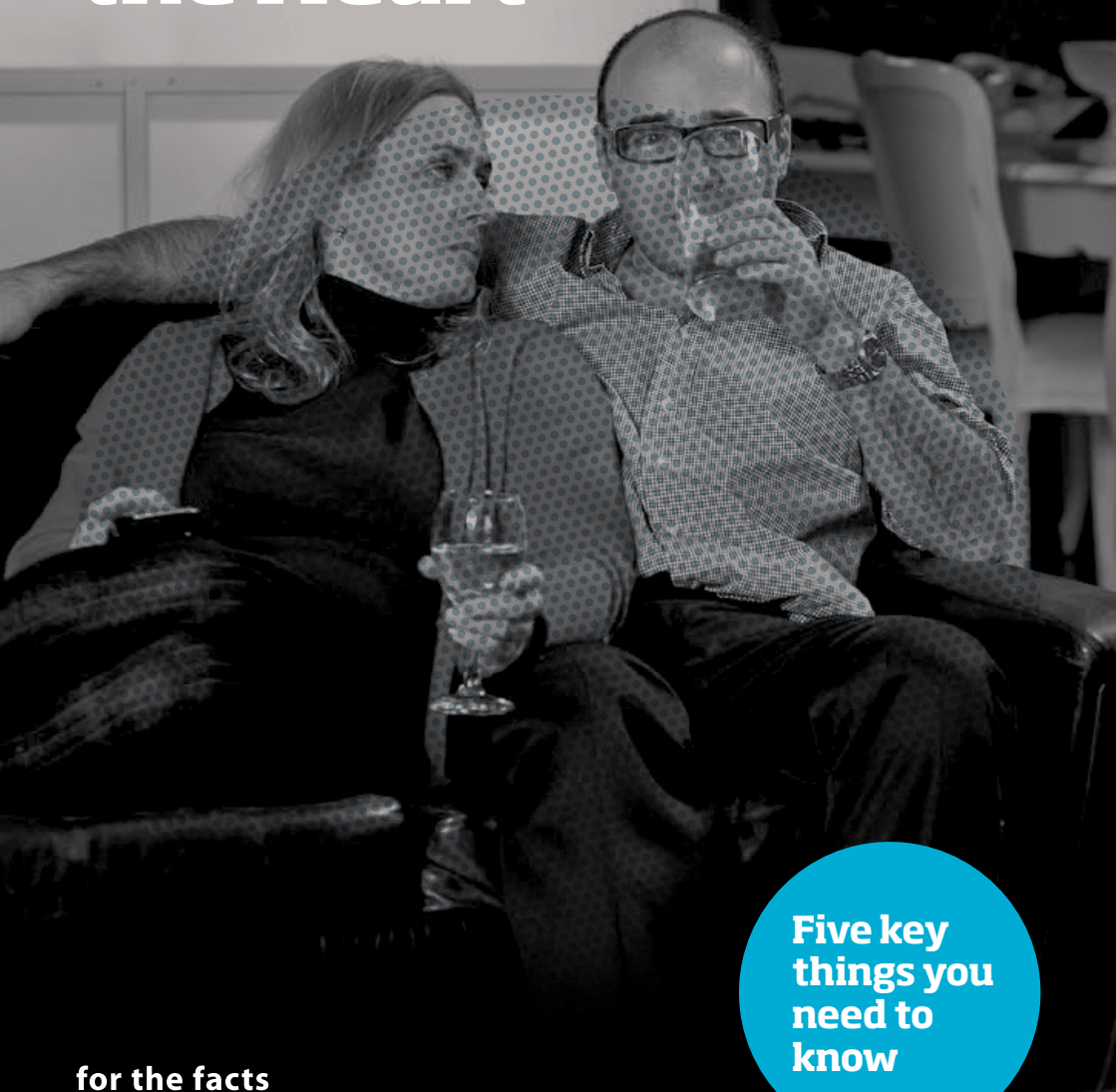


The facts about...

Alcohol and **the Heart**



for the facts
drinkaware.co.uk

**Five key
things you
need to
know**

It's the most important pump in the world. Your heart is a pump that keeps blood moving around your body. It delivers oxygen and nutrients to all parts of you, and carries away unwanted carbon dioxide and waste products.

When your heart, the arteries around your heart or your other blood vessels are damaged, this pumping system doesn't work properly. Such problems are collectively known as cardiovascular disease and lead to the death of 191,000 people a year, making this the UK's biggest killer.¹

Long-term excessive drinking increases your risk of developing problems with your heart. Drinking within the lower-risk guidelines is unlikely to cause damage and in some cases may help protect the heart.

Read on, as we debunk the myths and give you the facts about alcohol and the heart.

¹ British Heart Foundation (2010) Coronary heart disease statistics. Available at <http://www.bhf.org.uk/research/statistics/economic-costs.aspx>

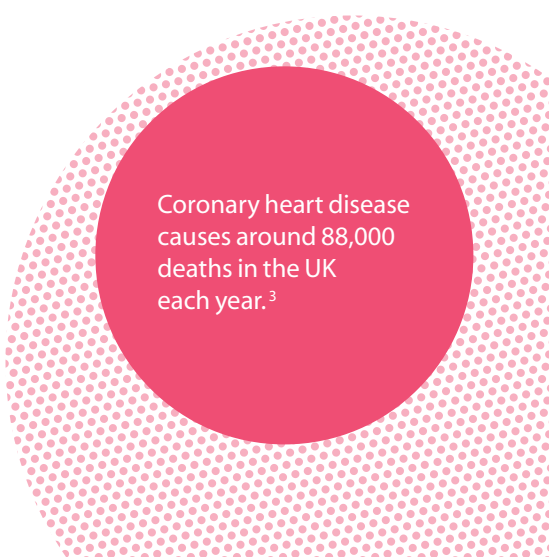
1

What is heart disease?

There are lots of different types of heart disease. Coronary heart disease is the most common type of heart disease and can lead to sudden death from a heart attack. It's caused by the gradual build-up of fatty deposits on the walls of the arteries in your heart (the coronary arteries). These deposits cause the artery to narrow, and make it harder for it to supply your heart muscle with the oxygen and nutrients which it needs to function normally.

What is a heart attack?

Heart attacks are the most common result of coronary heart disease. When coronary arteries become blocked, the heart can't pump properly, and in severe cases it may effectively stop beating altogether. Heart attacks frequently kill, but even if you survive, the damage to your heart muscle can lead to heart failure – when your heart can no longer pump blood around your body normally. This leads to symptoms such as swelling of the ankles and shortness of breath which affect you for the rest of your life and often become progressively worse. Although there are drugs which can help limit the impact of heart failure, there isn't a cure at the moment.²



Coronary heart disease causes around 88,000 deaths in the UK each year.³

² British Heart Foundation website, Heart failure. Available at <http://www.bhf.org.uk/heart-health/conditions/heart-failure.aspx>

³ British Heart Foundation (2010) Coronary heart disease statistics. Available at <http://www.bhf.org.uk/research/statistics/economic-costs.aspx>

2

Regularly drinking to excess can lead to heart disease

Regularly drinking more than the lower-risk guidelines of 2–3 units for women or 3–4 units for men over a long period of time increases your risk of developing heart disease. This is because drinking at this level can:

- **Increase the risk of high blood pressure.**

Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol causes raised blood pressure which is one of the most important risk factors for having a heart attack or a stroke. Alcohol is thought to do this through its effects on the kidneys and blood vessels. Increases in your blood pressure can also be caused by weight gain due to excessive drinking.

- **Weaken the heart muscle.**

This means the heart can't pump blood as efficiently. It's known as cardiomyopathy and can cause premature death, usually through heart failure.

- **Lead to an enlarged heart.**

This is a sign that the heart is unable to effectively pump blood around the body, and is known as heart failure.

Women who drink more than three units of alcohol a day and men who drink more than four are more likely to suffer from diseases affecting the heart or blood vessels.⁴


⁴ British Heart Foundation website, Alcohol and heart disease. Available at http://www.bhf.org.uk/keeping_your_heart_healthy/healthy_eating/alcohol_advice.aspx

3

Binge drinking can make your heart beat irregularly

The name Holiday Heart Syndrome is misleading. People who have it certainly won't be having a leisurely time. In fact they might feel like they are having a heart attack – characterised by severe pain in the centre of the chest. It gets its name because cases of the condition tend to increase around holiday times or after weekends, when people tend to drink more.⁵

Holiday Heart Syndrome tends to come on after episodes of heavy drinking – usually at least 15 units (about seven pints of 4% beer or more than a bottle and a half of 13% wine). If this happens, your heart starts to beat irregularly, making you feel breathless. Your blood pressure changes, increasing your risk of a heart attack and sudden death.



Women have a 1.3 times greater risk of developing coronary heart disease when they regularly drink more than six units a day.⁶

⁵ Menz V, Grimm W, Hoffmann J, Maisch B. (1996) 'Alcohol and rhythm disturbance: the holiday heart syndrome' vol. 21 no. 4 pp. 227-31.


⁶ Department of Health (2007) Safe. Sensible. Social. The next steps in the National Alcohol Strategy.

4

The jury is still out on whether drinking red wine really is “good for the heart” or not

We often hear news stories about the French (who have a long tradition of drinking red wine) having healthier hearts and arteries despite typically having a high-fat diet. Red wine has a high concentration of antioxidant substances called flavonoids. Some other alcoholic drinks like beer also have this antioxidant effect. Studies in animals suggest that these substances help to prevent thrombosis or blood clots.

But studies also show that people who drink wine more than other types of alcohol tend to live healthier lives; they are less likely to smoke and have a healthier diet too. So it may be that these other lifestyle factors, rather than the fact that they drink red wine are the reason why they have healthier hearts.



Men nearly double their chances of developing coronary heart disease by regularly drinking more than eight units of alcohol a day.⁷

⁷ Department of Health (2007) Safe. Sensible. Social. The next steps in the National Alcohol Strategy.

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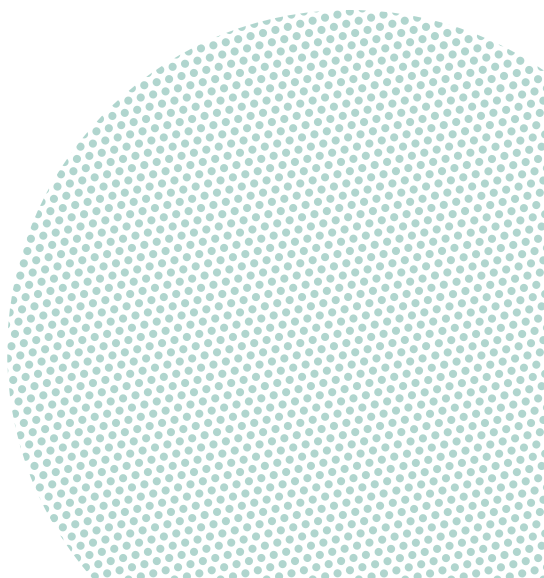
It's not a good idea to start drinking alcohol to protect yourself against heart disease

Simply put, it's just not worth it.

With alcohol and the heart, it's a benefit and risk trade off. So, for example, alcohol's anti-clotting ability, potentially protective against heart attacks, may increase the risk of haemorrhagic stroke (when a blood vessel bursts inside the brain), or bleeding within the brain. Regularly drink more than the guidelines and the potential benefits of alcohol on the heart are outweighed by the increased chances of developing other serious problems like liver disease or cancer.

There are safer ways to reduce your risk of developing heart disease. To keep your heart healthy, the British Heart Foundation (BHF) advises:

- **exercising**
- **eating a healthy diet**
- **being aware of dangers such as smoking, drinking, high blood pressure and stress.**



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 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.

B Eat well.

A healthy meal before you start drinking, and low-fat, low-salt snacks between drinks can help to slow down the absorption of alcohol. Eating a balanced diet will reduce your risk of developing heart disease too.

C Know what you're drinking.

The MyDrinkaware drink tracking tool can help you tell if you are drinking too much. It can even help you cut down. Start tracking at drinkaware.co.uk

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 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.

For help, facts and lifestyle advice, contact the British Heart Foundation. Call their Heart Helpline on 0300 330 3311 or visit www.bhf.org.uk

The Blood Pressure Association offers a range of information to help you take control of, or prevent, high blood pressure. Call their information line on 0845 241 0989 or visit www.bpassoc.org.uk

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