

The facts about...

Alcohol and **Dependence**

for the facts
drinkaware.co.uk

**Five key
things you
need to
know**

A glass of wine with dinner, a beer after work, a cocktail in the sunshine on holiday. Alcohol makes an appearance in so many parts of our lives that it can be easy to forget that, like many drugs, it's addictive, both physically and psychologically.

The NHS estimates that around 9% of men and 4% of women in the UK show signs of alcohol dependence (sometimes known as 'alcoholism').¹ This means that drinking alcohol becomes an important, or sometimes the most important, factor in their lives and they feel they're unable to function without it.

¹ NHS Information Centre (2013) Statistics on Alcohol: England, 2013.

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Usually several different factors contribute to someone becoming alcohol dependent

Alcohol dependence can run in families. In general, if parents are dependent on alcohol, their children are four times more likely to develop dependence too. It's partly down to your genes, but is also influenced by your family's attitudes to alcohol and the environment you grow up in.

Stressful events such as bereavement or losing a job can also trigger heavy drinking, which can then lead to alcohol dependence.

People who are alcohol dependent have higher rates of other psychiatric disorders than people in the general population – particularly depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, psychosis and drug misuse. Often, people drink to try and reduce the symptoms (sometimes known as 'self-medicating'), but in the long term alcohol makes these disorders worse because it interferes with the chemical balance in our brains.

Some people believe that there's such a thing as an 'addictive personality' which leads to alcohol dependence. But there's not much strong evidence to support this view.



In 2011, 6,923 deaths were directly related to alcohol.²

² NHS Information Centre (2013) Statistics on Alcohol: England, 2013.

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Taking regular breaks from alcohol is the best way to lower your risk of becoming dependent on it

If you drink regularly, your body builds up a tolerance to alcohol. Tolerance is the physiological response we have to most drugs: the more you consume, the more your body needs to have the same effect. Regular drinking induces certain enzymes in your liver that break up (metabolise) alcohol. If you drink heavily over weeks or months, levels of these enzymes go up, your tolerance builds and you need more alcohol to get the same effects.³

But although you may find that you can handle more drink before you start slurring your words or stumbling, this doesn't mean that alcohol isn't still harming you. Put simply, tolerance to the short term effects of drinking does not equal tolerance to the harmful effects of alcohol on the body.

Brain systems get tolerant to alcohol too, and although you may be able to walk a straight line after drinking quite a lot, this doesn't mean alcohol isn't harming you – it means the brain has adapted so that the next day its cells 'expect' alcohol.

If you do become dependent on alcohol, you may suffer "withdrawal symptoms" such as anxiety and jitteriness when you're not drinking, and you can find yourself taking alcohol just to relieve these symptoms.

When you're drinking nearly every day you can become psychologically dependent on alcohol too.

Breaking your drinking cycle is an important way to test for – and tackle – this kind of dependence. Try taking some days off from drinking. It can prevent your body from becoming accustomed to alcohol and help to lower or 'reset' your tolerance.

³ Drinkaware interview with Dr Nick Sheron, liver specialist at Southampton University. Available at <http://www.drinkaware.co.uk/alcohol-and-you/health/should-you-take-a-break-from-alcohol>

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Four warning signs that you may be dependent on alcohol

If you are 'dependent' on alcohol, you're stumbling around drunk every day, right?

Not necessarily. There are varying degrees of alcohol dependence and different ways in which it can affect you. If you find you have to drink more to get the same effect, that's called "tolerance" and it's an early sign of dependence. If you find that you 'need' to share a bottle of wine with your partner most nights of the week, or always go out for a few pints after work, just to unwind, that's a "behavioural" or "cognitive" form of dependence. You are very likely to be dependent on alcohol if you find that you can't control your drinking even though it's causing health problems or damaging your personal life. And if you get the shakes once you stop drinking - that's a serious form of dependence called "withdrawal symptoms".

- 1. Worrying about where your next drink is coming from and planning social, family and work events around alcohol.**
- 2. Finding you have a compulsive need to drink and finding it hard to stop once you start.**
- 3. Waking up and drinking – or feeling the need to have a drink in the morning.**
- 4. Suffering from withdrawal symptoms, such as sweating, shaking and nausea, which stop once you drink alcohol.**

If you're worried that you have any of these symptoms of alcohol dependence, talk to your GP or seek further information from one of the organisations on the back of this factsheet.



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You can develop mental health and psychological problems if you're dependent on alcohol

Anxiety, depression and suicidal feelings can all develop when you're alcohol dependent. This is because regular, heavy drinking interferes with neurotransmitters in our brains that are needed for good mental health.

Being dependent on alcohol can affect your relationships with your partner, family and friends. It might mean you don't perform as well at work and if that continues for any length of time you could face losing your job, which could lead to financial problems as well.

These issues can also contribute to depression and anxiety. If you use alcohol to try and improve your mood, you may be starting a vicious cycle.

If you think your mental health is suffering because of your drinking, but you feel you're not able to stop, ask for professional help. Start with a visit to your GP and explain how you feel.

In 2012, 178,247 prescriptions for drugs to treat alcohol dependency were prescribed.⁴

⁴ NHS Information Centre (2013) Statistics on Alcohol: England, 2013.

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Withdrawal symptoms from alcohol can be physical and psychological

If you're dependent on alcohol, you can experience withdrawal symptoms if you suddenly stop drinking. Physical withdrawal symptoms include:

- hand tremors ('the shakes')
- sweating
- nausea
- visual hallucinations (seeing things that are not real)
- seizures (fits) in the most serious cases.

Psychological withdrawal symptoms include:

- depression
- anxiety
- irritability
- restlessness
- insomnia (difficulty sleeping).

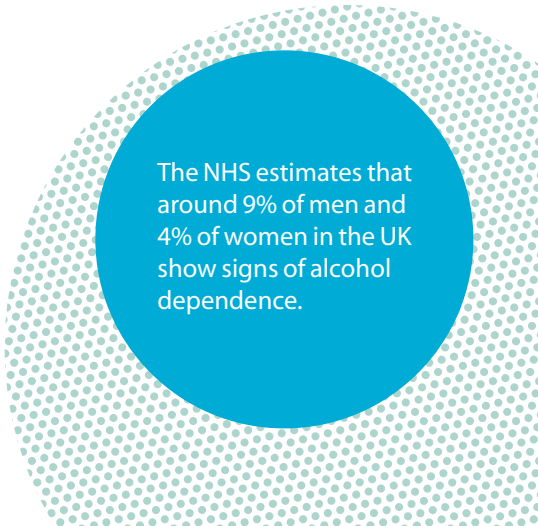
Severely dependent drinkers usually experience very strong withdrawal symptoms. Sometimes people drink to avoid these symptoms, a pattern known as 'relief drinking'.⁵

It can take between three months and a year to fully recover from the effects of alcohol withdrawal. Even then, the brain remains abnormally sensitive to alcohol.⁶ So if you start drinking again, your high tolerance to alcohol and withdrawal symptoms can come back within a few days⁷. It's why doctors usually recommend that you don't start drinking again, even in moderation.

⁵ NHS Choices website, Alcohol misuse – definition. Available at <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Alcohol-misuse/Pages/Definition.aspx>

⁶ The British Psychological Society & The Royal College of Psychiatrists (2011) Alcohol use disorders: diagnosis, assessment and management of harmful drinking and alcohol dependence. National Clinical Practice Guideline 115.

⁷ *ibid.*



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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 a 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.
[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.

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.

If you need help with a drinking problem you can phone the national Alcoholics Anonymous helpline on 0845 769 7555 or visit www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Addaction is a drug and alcohol treatment charity. To find the Addaction service closest to you, visit the "Service Finder" section of the website www.addaction.org.uk

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