

The facts about...

Alcohol and **diabetes**



**Five key
things you
need to
know**

for the facts
drinkaware.co.uk

Diabetes affects around 2.9 million people in the UK. It's likely there are another 850,000 people who have the condition, but aren't aware of it.¹

It's a common, life-long condition that occurs when the pancreas doesn't produce enough insulin, or the insulin it does produce doesn't work properly. Insulin is a hormone that transfers glucose from the bloodstream into the cells to be used for energy. If you have diabetes, your body cannot make proper use of this glucose so it builds up in the blood instead of moving into your cells.

The chances of developing diabetes may depend on a mix of your genes and your lifestyle. Drinking to excess, for example, can help to cause diabetes.

It's a manageable condition. But when it's not well managed, it is associated with serious complications including heart disease, stroke, blindness, kidney disease, nerve damage and amputations.²

1

There are two main types of diabetes³

Type 1 diabetes

Develops if the body can't produce enough insulin, because insulin-producing cells in the pancreas have been destroyed.

It can happen:

- **because of genetic factors**
- **when a virus or infection triggers an autoimmune response (where the body starts attacking itself)**

People who have this type of diabetes are usually diagnosed before they're 40 and there's currently no way to prevent it. It's the least common type of diabetes – only 10% of all cases are type 1.⁴

Type 2 diabetes

Develops when the body can still make some insulin, but not enough, or when the body becomes resistant to insulin.

It can happen:

- **when people are overweight and inactive. People who are an 'apple shape' (with lots of fat around the abdomen) have a greater risk of developing type 2 diabetes**
- **because of genetic factors**

People who have this type of diabetes are usually diagnosed when they're over 40, and it's more common in men.

However, more overweight children and young people in the UK are being diagnosed with the condition. It is also particularly common among people of African-Caribbean, Asian and Hispanic origin. 90% of all people with diabetes have type 2 diabetes.⁵



The World Health Organisation estimates that around 10% of adults in the UK with diabetes have type 1 and 90% have type 2.⁶

¹ Diabetes UK website. What is diabetes? Available at http://www.diabetes.org.uk/Guide-to-diabetes/Introduction-to-diabetes/What_is_diabetes/

² Diabetes UK website. Diabetes in the UK 2012. Available at: <http://www.diabetes.org.uk/Documents/Reports/Diabetes-in-the-UK-2012.pdf>

³ NHS Choices website. Diabetes. Available at <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Diabetes/Pages/Diabetes.aspx>

⁴ NHS Choices website. Diabetes type 1. Available at <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Diabetes-type1/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

⁵ NHS Choices website. Diabetes type 2. Available at <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Diabetes-type2/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

⁶ NHS Choices website. Diabetes. Available at <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Diabetes/Pages/Diabetes.aspx>

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Could I be diabetic?

Signs of diabetes include being extremely tired, having blurred vision and feeling more thirsty than usual.⁷

The main symptoms of undiagnosed diabetes can include:

- **going to the toilet to urinate more often than usual, especially at night**
- **feeling thirsty**
- **extreme tiredness**
- **unexplained weight loss**
- **genital itching or regular episodes of thrush**
- **slow healing of cuts and wounds**
- **blurred vision**

With type 1 diabetes signs and symptoms are usually obvious and develop very quickly over a few weeks. Once the diabetes is treated and under control, symptoms will go away quickly.

In type 2 diabetes, signs and symptoms may not be so obvious. The condition develops slowly over several years, and it might only be picked up in a routine medical check up. As with type 1 diabetes, symptoms are quickly relieved once diabetes is treated and under control.

Busting the myths about diabetes

You cannot catch diabetes. But you can control some of the risk factors that lead to the development of type 2 diabetes.

Eating sweets and sugar does not cause diabetes. But eating a lot of sugary and fatty foods can lead to being overweight.

Stress does not cause diabetes. Although it may make the symptoms worse in people who already have the condition.

An accident or an illness will not cause diabetes. But it may reveal diabetes if it is already there.

⁷ NHS Choices website. Diabetes type 2. Available at <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Diabetes-type2/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

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Drinking alcohol can contribute to the conditions that cause diabetes

There are three main ways drinking alcohol to excess can be a factor in causing diabetes:

1

Heavy drinking can reduce the body's sensitivity to insulin, which can trigger type 2 diabetes.⁸

2

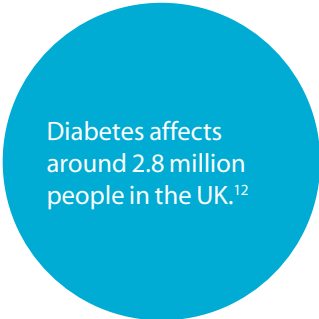
Diabetes is a common side effect of chronic pancreatitis, which is overwhelmingly caused by heavy drinking.

3

Alcohol contains a huge amount of calories – one pint of lager can have around the same calories as a slice of pizza. So drinking can also increase your chance of becoming overweight and your risk of developing type 2 diabetes.⁹

4

Teetotallers and heavy drinkers have an equally high risk of developing diabetes. Low levels of alcohol could potentially provide some level of protection against developing diabetes. According to a review of 15 previous studies (in 2005) into the link between diabetes and alcohol, 'moderate drinkers' (who drank between one and six units per day) were a third less likely to develop type 2 diabetes than either people who didn't drink alcohol or those who drank heavily. This is thought to be because low to moderate levels of alcohol actually make the body more sensitive to insulin.^{10,11}



Diabetes affects around 2.8 million people in the UK.¹²

⁸ Shah, J 1987, 'Alcohol decreases insulin sensitivity in healthy subjects', *Alcohol and Alcoholism*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 103-109.

⁹ NHS Choices website. Diabetes type 2. Available at <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Diabetes-type2/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

¹⁰ Kopper, L et al 2005, 'Moderate alcohol consumption lowers the risk of type 2 diabetes: A meta-analysis of prospective observational studies', *Diabetes Care*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 719-725.

¹¹ Kiechl, S et al 1996, 'Insulin sensitivity and regular alcohol consumption: Large, prospective, cross-sectional population study (Bruneck study)', *British Medical Journal*, vol. 313, no. 7064, p. 1040.

¹² Diabetes UK website. What is diabetes? Available at http://www.diabetes.org.uk/Guide-to-diabetes/Introduction-to-diabetes/What_is_diabetes/


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The effects of diabetes

When someone has diabetes, more of the glucose in their body stays in their blood – it isn't being used as fuel for energy. The body tries to reduce blood glucose levels by flushing the excess glucose out of the body into their urine.

Patients on insulin treatment for diabetes can develop abnormally low blood sugar levels. This is known as hypoglycaemia. Symptoms of hypoglycaemia include:

- **slurring words**
- **a headache**
- **confusion**
- **double vision**
- **abnormal behavior**
- **unconsciousness**



People with type 2 diabetes are usually diagnosed when they're over 40, while type 1 diabetics are mostly under 40.¹⁵

Hypoglycaemia can be particularly dangerous when you're drinking because people can mistakenly think that you're drunk and may not realise you need urgent medical help.¹³

Drinking heavily can also increase the chances of developing hypoglycaemia because it prevents the liver from making glucose when you don't eat for between six and 12 hours.

For example, the risk of hypoglycaemia would increase the morning after you've slept following heavy drinking.

If you have nerve damage as a result of diabetes, drinking alcohol can make it worse and increase the pain, tingling, numbness and other symptoms.¹⁴

¹³ NHS Choices website, Hypoglycaemia (low blood sugar) – Symptoms. Available at <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Hypoglycaemia/Pages/Symptoms.aspx>

¹⁴ Diabetes UK website, Your health. Available at http://www.diabetes.org.uk/Guide-to-diabetes/Healthy_lifestyle/Alcohol_and_diabetes/Your_health/

¹⁵ NHS Choices website, Diabetes, type 2 – causes. Available at <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Diabetes-type2/Pages/Causes.aspx>

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People with diabetes don't usually have to give up alcohol

Doctors usually advise diabetics that they can safely drink alcohol in moderation. So, if you have diabetes and drink, it's particularly important to stay within the government guidelines. It's also important to eat a healthy diet and take exercise to help control blood sugar levels.

Of all serious conditions, type 2 diabetes has the strongest association with obesity.¹⁶



¹⁶ NHS Choices website. Diabetes. Available at <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Diabetes/Pages/Diabetes.aspx>

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 Eat well.

A healthy meal before you start drinking, and snacks between drinks can help to slow down the absorption of alcohol. It's particularly important if you're diabetic. Alcohol lowers blood sugar levels, so eat plenty of food, preferably carbohydrates, to make sure blood sugar levels stay steady.

B Keep track of what you're drinking.

Use our free and simple online tool MyDrinkaware. As well as noting how many units you're drinking, it will tell you how many calories you're consuming too - and the equivalent in burgers, kebabs and donuts. It's a great way to watch your units and your weight. 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.

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 Drinkaware.co.uk

Your GP can help you figure out if you should make any changes in 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 more information about diabetes, contact Diabetes UK. They work for people with diabetes, funding research, campaigning and helping people live with the condition. www.diabetes.org.uk

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