

The facts about...

# Alcohol and **Women**



**Five key  
things you  
need to  
know**

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

## **Equality and alcohol simply don't mix.**

Women's bodies, in general, process alcohol at a slower rate than men's. When they drink similar amounts, women tend to feel the effects far more, even compared to a man of the same weight.

Traditionally, women have drunk less than men. But in recent decades, the gap has narrowed in relation to how much each sex typically drinks. And with this closing in the gap of alcohol consumption between the sexes, there are a number of resulting health implications for women.

Alcohol can affect fertility, put you at greater risk of breast cancer and increase some side-effects of the menopause. So, whatever age you are it's important to keep an eye on how much you're drinking.

If you want to look and feel good, it's best to drink within the government's lower-risk guidelines for women.


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## The guidelines for men and women are different for a good reason

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 medium 175 ml glass of 13% wine). 'Regularly' means drinking every day or most days of the week.

Women are advised to drink less because, in general, their bodies can't process alcohol as well as men's. There are a few reasons for this:

- **The average woman weighs less than the average man. This means she has less tissue to absorb alcohol**
- **Women have a higher ratio of fat to water than men and so they're less able to dilute alcohol within the body. It's why women will tend to have a higher concentration of alcohol in their blood than men after drinking the same amount**
- **Alcohol stays in a women's system longer before being metabolised (processed) than it does in a man's. This is because women generally have lower levels of alcohol dehydrogenase (AHD) the chemical that metabolises alcohol in the liver**



More than one in 10 (12%) women surveyed on behalf of the NHS in 2010 had drunk more than twice the government's daily unit guidelines on at least one day in the week before they were interviewed.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> NHS Information Centre, Statistics on Alcohol: England, 2012. Available at <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/pubs/alcohol12>

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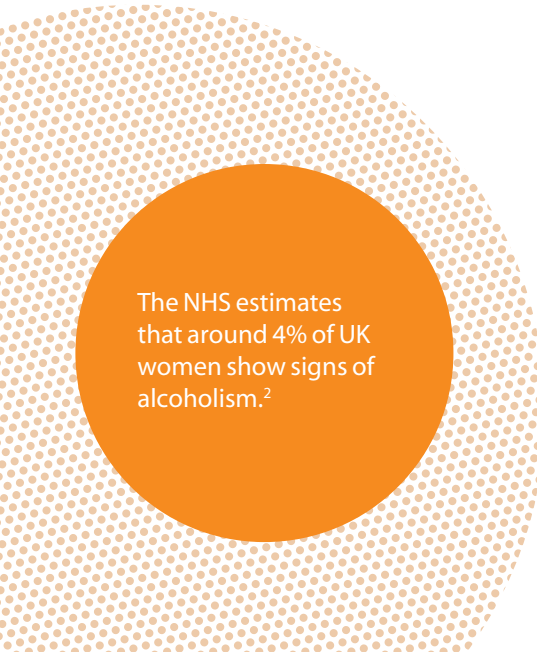
## Drinking less will help you look good

Tired eyes. Bad skin. Weight gain. There's no doubt alcohol can have some unattractive effects.

Alcohol interferes with the normal sleep process so you often wake up feeling – and looking – like you haven't had much rest. Alcohol dehydrates your body too, including the skin. It's also thought to deprive the skin of certain vital vitamins and nutrients. So when you look in the mirror the morning after, you may not be so happy with what you see.

With two large glasses of wine hiding the same number of calories as a hamburger, it's easy to see why regular drinking can make you gain weight. Alcohol reduces the amount of fat your body burns for energy. Because we can't store alcohol in the body, our systems want to get rid of it as quickly as possible, and this process takes priority over absorbing nutrients and burning fat.

Try taking a break from alcohol and see how you look and feel.



The NHS estimates that around 4% of UK women show signs of alcoholism.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> NHS Information Centre, Statistics on Alcohol: England, 2012. Available at <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/pubs/alcohol12>

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## Alcohol can affect your fertility

The Department of Health recommends that women trying for a baby, should avoid alcohol altogether. If you are trying for a baby and do choose to drink, the government's advice is to not have more than one to two units of alcohol once or twice a week (two units is the equivalent to a 175 ml glass of wine), and not to get drunk.

Alcohol can disrupt a woman's menstrual cycle and studies have shown that even drinking small amounts can reduce her chance of conceiving.

But if you're trying for a baby, make sure you're not the only one on the soft drinks. Alcohol affects male fertility too, so it's best for your partner to cut back as well. In men, alcohol reduces testosterone levels and can harm sperm so that it's less able to move towards an egg. And then there's the infamous 'brewer's droop' – where alcohol depresses the central nervous system, making it more difficult for a man to get and keep an erection.



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## **Alcohol can increase your risk of getting breast cancer - and a host of other serious health conditions**

The more alcohol you drink, the higher your risk of developing cancer.

Drinking alcohol can increase your risk of several types of cancer, including liver, bowel, breast, mouth, oesophageal cancer (food pipe) and laryngeal cancer (voice box).

Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women. Oxford University's Million Women Study of 1.3 million women across the world found that the relative risk of breast cancer increases by 7.1% for each 10 grams of alcohol (1 unit of alcohol) you typically drink a day.<sup>3</sup>

Heavy drinking can also cause heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, stomach ulcers, pancreatitis and serious injuries.

About one in six women may develop a health problem caused by alcohol.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>3</sup> The Million Women Study website, Study progress. Available at [http://www.millionwomenstudy.org/study\\_progress/](http://www.millionwomenstudy.org/study_progress/)

<sup>4</sup> Royal College of Psychiatrists website, Alcohol and Depression. Available at <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfo/problems/alcoholanddrugs/alcoholdepression.aspx>

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## Alcohol tends to affect older women more than younger women

As we get older, we lose muscle and gain fat. We also break down alcohol more slowly, which means we're more sensitive to its effects. So, even if you drink the same amount of alcohol as you get older it is likely to affect you more than younger people. Despite this, adults aged 45 and over were three times as likely as those aged under 45 to drink almost every day (13 per cent compared with 4 per cent).<sup>5</sup>

When women reach the menopause their bodies are affected by changing hormones. Alcohol can trigger some symptoms of the menopause, such as hot flushes and night sweats<sup>6</sup>. Menopause can also disrupt your sleep because of night sweats and cause you to gain weight. Alcohol often makes both of these issues worse.<sup>7,8</sup>

As we get older, our bones slowly get thinner too, particularly in women after the menopause – alcohol can make this worse, increasing your risk of osteoporosis (a condition that affects the bones, causing them to become weak and fragile and more likely to break).<sup>9</sup>

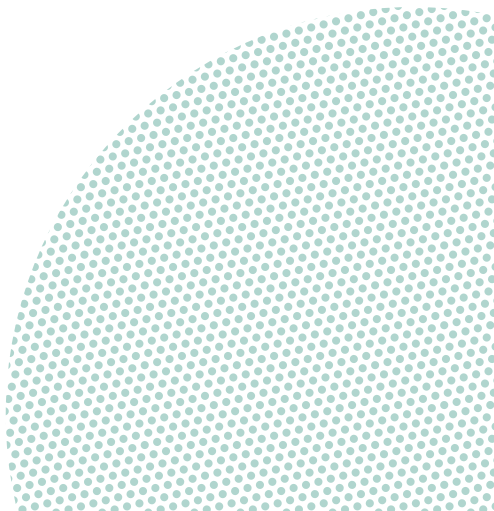
<sup>5</sup> ONS General Lifestyle Survey Overview Report, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Royal College of Nursing website, Menopause: lifestyle and therapeutic approaches. RCN guidance for nurses, midwives and health visitors (PDF). Available at [http://www.rcn.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/349720/003839.pdf](http://www.rcn.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/349720/003839.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Women's Health website, Menopause, Adrenals and Alcohol Abuse. Available at <http://www.womens-health.co.uk/hormone-changes-increase-risk-for-alcohol-abuse.ht>

<sup>8</sup> The British Menopause Society website, Osteoporosis factsheet. Available at <http://www.thebms.org.uk/factdetail.php?id=7>

<sup>9</sup> NHS Choices website, Osteoporosis: an introduction. Available at <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Osteoporosis/Pages/Introduction.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 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 Size matters.**

It's easier to cut down by choosing a smaller glass size. Spritzers and shandies will also help reduce the number of units you're drinking.

**C Know what you're drinking.**

Check out the ABV on a bottle of wine before you buy it. ABV stands for Alcohol by Volume, which is the percentage of the drink that is pure alcohol. It's not uncommon for a bottle of wine to be verging on 15% ABV, which could easily push you over the daily unit guidelines if you drink more than one glass. Producers are increasingly introducing 10% or lower ABV wines that are as palatable as their stronger counterparts. Look out for them when you're next buying a bottle.

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# 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](http://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.

The Family Planning Association can help you make informed choices about sex and contraception. Visit their website at [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk)

If you have questions about cancer, call the Macmillan Support Line free on 0808 808 0000 (Monday to Friday, 9am–8pm).

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