

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH? KNOW YOUR ALCOHOL LIMITS

THE FIRE FIGHTERS CHARITY

We all know mountain rescuers enjoy a cheeky beer or two, especially at conferences. Given that more than one in three adults drank more alcohol during the first lockdown, according to a University of Cambridge study (see opposite), two more lockdowns on seems a good time to ask exactly how much is too much. Welfare case worker for The Fire Fighters Charity, **Irene Ramsden**, dispels some of the myths around alcohol and how to spot the signs of addiction.



ALCOHOL IS A DEPRESSANT. IT MAY MAKE YOU FEEL BETTER AT FIRST, BUT ULTIMATELY IT WILL EXACERBATE ANY EXISTING MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS, PARTICULARLY ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

Drinking is a part of life for many people, especially at certain times of year. When it's so common in society, it can be hard to tell the difference between someone who likes to have a few drinks now and then and someone with a real problem.

Considering the year we've all had, it's no wonder many of us are feeling a little more stressed or anxious than usual. But these feelings can cause our drinking to creep up, which can have both physical and psychological consequences.

THE IMPACT OF ALCOHOL ON YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Research from Alcohol Change UK found that over half of UK drinkers have turned to alcohol for mental health reasons during the pandemic, but of that figure, four in ten drinkers said turning to drink actually worsened their mental health. Their research also found that almost one in three people

have been drinking at increasing or high-risk levels over the past six months.

Alcohol is a depressant. It may make you feel better at first but, ultimately, it will exacerbate any existing mental health concerns, particularly anxiety and depression.

WOULD YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF TO HAVE DANGEROUS ALCOHOL HABITS?

There are messages we tell ourselves to normalise our drinking, which we need to watch out for. These include any of the following reasons:

- It helps me relax
- I deserve it, I've had a hard day
- I don't feel good and alcohol cheers me up
- My mates drink way more than me, my drinking must be okay
- Everyone I know drinks

- I can't stop right before Christmas... before my big birthday... before the team dinner... the conference... (pick your party)... that's anti-social...
- My drinking can't be that bad... I'm still functioning and going to work.

Knowing how much is too much can be confusing when it comes to alcohol. Most of us know when we've overdone it (usually the following morning) but it's the cumulative, long-term effect that can creep up on us. Before we know it, we may have developed a drinking habit without even realising it, and we may be drinking more than we like or should.

ALCOHOL ADDICTION

Alcohol addiction, also known as alcoholism, is a disease that affects people of all walks of life. The severity of the disease, how often someone drinks, and the alcohol they consume varies from person to person. Some people drink heavily all day, while others binge drink and then stay sober for a while.

It has no single cause. Psychological, genetic, and behavioural factors can all contribute to having the disease, and factors like genetics, sex, race, or socioeconomic group may predispose someone to alcohol addiction.

Addiction can show itself in a variety of ways, depending on the severity of the disease and how often someone drinks. But regardless of how the addiction looks, we typically say someone has an alcohol addiction if they heavily rely on drinking and can't stay sober for an extended period of time. Some symptoms of alcohol addiction are:

- Increased quantity or frequency of use of alcohol
- High tolerance for alcohol, or lack of 'hangover symptoms
- Drinking at inappropriate times, such as first thing in the morning, or in places like church or work
- Wanting to be where alcohol is present and avoiding situations where there is none

- Changes in friendships — someone with an alcohol addiction may choose friends who also drink heavily
- Avoiding contact with loved ones
- Hiding alcohol, or hiding while drinking
- Dependence on alcohol to function in everyday life
- Increased lethargy, depression, or other emotional issues
- Legal or professional problems such as an arrest or loss of a job.

As an addiction tends to get worse over time, it's important to look for early warning signs. If identified and treated early, someone with an alcohol addiction may be able to avoid major consequences of the disease.

It's important to note that alcoholism is a real disease, therefore it has serious effects on the body and your wellbeing.

Although alcohol initially makes you feel more relaxed, the more you drink can lead to inhibition and it distorts your judgement. It can cause increased anxiety, depression and aggression, which can lead to coordination issues and blackouts. This in turn results in confusion, stupor and even coma. At this point it can affect your heart rate and breathing.

There is also a link between alcohol consumption, some cancers, dementia and liver disease, not to mention being extremely high in calories.

SO WHAT'S THE ADVICE AROUND ALCOHOL?

We say to drink a maximum of 14 units a week. That works out around the following amounts:

Spirits: alcohol by volume (ABV) 37.5%: 14 single measures a week

Average-strength lager: ABV 4%: seven pints a week

Average-strength wine: ABV 12%: nine 125ml glasses, seven 175ml glasses or four 250ml glasses.

We also recommend you spread it evenly over the week, and not binge-drink it all in one go.

Remember, the following morning you're still likely to have alcohol in your system as well, so you shouldn't get behind a wheel. It takes one hour per unit to remove the alcohol from your system. So if you'd had five pints one night, you shouldn't drive until at least ten hours later. And women absorb alcohol faster than men and get rid of it more slowly.

If you'd like more information on alcohol, addiction, or knowing your limits, there are plenty of online resources available. 📄

OTHER RESOURCES:

NHS: nhs.uk/conditions/alcohol-misuse/

Alcohol Change: alcoholchange.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous: alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Al Anon UK: al-anonuk.org.uk

Drink Aware: drinkaware.co.uk

Alcohol Health Alliance UK: ahauk.org

Covid-19 and lockdown measures drove some individuals more than others to use alcohol to cope with stress, according to the Cambridge University study, published in BMJ Open.

In early March, the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a pandemic and many countries put in place drastic safety measures to control the spread of the virus, including an extended lockdown period. In the UK, the first nationwide lockdown started on 23 March 2020 and lasted until 1 June, when restrictions began to be eased. Since then more localised lockdowns have been implemented where necessary.

A team of researchers at the University of Cambridge has explored whether the stress of the pandemic and lockdown measures affected people's alcohol consumption. Between 14 and 28 May 2020, 1346 people around the world completed an online survey about their drinking habits before and during lockdown. The researchers used their responses to compare the amount of alcohol consumed during lockdown against that in November 2019, as well as their drinking severity (occurrences of problem drinking such as drinking to the point of memory loss or neglecting personal responsibilities due to drinking). They also assessed mental health factors such as depression and anxiety.

The survey revealed that while the units of alcohol consumed per week decreased during lockdown — down from a mean average of 8.32 units in November to 8.03 during lockdown — a substantial percentage of individuals (36%) increased their drinking during lockdown. In the UK, the units of alcohol consumed per week increased from 10.94 to 11.25 units.

Samantha N Sallie, the study's first author and a PhD student at the Department of Psychiatry, said: 'While in countries such as Canada and the USA people drank less during lockdown, in the UK there was a small increase in alcohol consumption.'

Older individuals tended to increase their alcohol consumption more than younger people during lockdown, from 10 to 11 units weekly. Age may play a particularly unique role in the context of COVID-19 due to the greater need for older people to have more stringent isolation, with potentially fewer support mechanisms, and hence a risk of greater isolation and loneliness, as well as concern about the impact of COVID-19 on their personal health.

Respondents with children reported a greater increase in alcohol consumption during lockdown, of between 0.54 and 2.02 units, though their depression and anxiety scores were lower than for those without children. The researchers say this suggests the additional burden of childcare and home schooling contributed to the tendency towards drinking, possibly in the context of stress relief, but the presence of children may also be protective against depression and anxiety.

'For parents having to take on extra childcare responsibilities during lockdown, possibly at the same time as having to manage changes to their work routine, it's possible that the extra stress increased their tendency to drink,' said Sallie. 'On the other hand, having children may mitigate against loneliness that has been highlighted as a major issue during the isolation of lockdown.'

The team found that essential workers — specifically healthcare workers responsible for taking care of individuals with Covid-19 — showed an increase in drinking amount of between 0.45 and 1.26 units, while those whose loved ones became severely ill or died from Covid-19 showed an increase in problem drinking during the lockdown.

'This demonstrates how the virus itself has affected alcohol consumption in those who have had close contact with the very real and devastating effects of Covid-19,' added Sallie.

Although men consumed more alcohol than women, they showed a decrease in both drinking amount and severity during lockdown, while women demonstrated the opposite trend, with women consuming an extra unit of alcohol a week during lockdown. This finding corroborates evidence that indicates women are more likely than men to consume alcohol in order to cope with stress.

Individuals who reported a change in their employment status or were isolating alone were more likely to have higher depression scores, but showed no change in their drinking behaviour. Those individuals isolating with others but reporting a poor relationship were more likely to have higher depression and anxiety scores. Dr Valerie Voon, senior author of the study from the University of Cambridge, said, 'As Covid-19 remains part of daily life, many of us are turning to alcohol to cope with stress. For many people, drinking in moderation can be help with stress relief, but for others it can be more problematic. Alcohol misuse is a major public health issue in the United Kingdom, costing £21-52 billion with NHS costs of £3.5 billion per year. Our findings highlight a need to identify those individuals who are at risk for problem drinking so we can offer them greater support during the ongoing pandemic.'

The researchers say there may be a number of reasons for the overall decrease in alcohol use and problematic use, including stringent lockdown measures leading to a decrease in the availability of alcoholic drinks within the immediate household and because people tend to consume alcohol in social situations, such as at the pub or when eating out.

Reference: Sallie, S N et al Assessing International Alcohol Consumption Patterns During Isolation from the COVID-19 Pandemic Using an Online Survey: Highlighting Negative Emotionality Mechanisms. BMJ Open; 26 Nov 2020; DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2020-044276

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TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE CHARITY,
GO TO FIREFIGHTERSCHARITY.ORG.UK

The in-house rehabilitation programme offered by **The Fire Fighters Charity** is currently unavailable due to Covid-19 but will be accessible to mountain and cave rescue team members, via the Rescue Benevolent Fund, when guidance permits.