

Alcohol and Diabetes



Information leaflet

Drinking alcohol has become one of the most accepted forms of socialising in society today. Many people enjoy the occasional drink whether it be a glass of wine with a meal or a beer down at the local pub with friends.

The good news is that just because you have diabetes, it does not mean that you have to give up alcohol. It is however important that you follow the national guidelines and only consume the recommended allowance as with the general population.

The recommended weekly allowance for men and women is 14 units.

It is important that you understand how units are calculated and how they are measured. One unit is approximately:

- ½ pint ordinary strength beer, lager or cider
- 1 pub measure (50ml) sherry or vermouth
- 1 small glass of wine (148ml)
- 1 pub measure of spirit (25ml), e.g. gin, vodka or whiskey.



We all need to be aware that the strength of alcohol in certain drinks can vary considerably, with many having an increased amount of alcohol put into them over the years. The measurements can also vary, certainly when drinking at home and this will determine the amount of units in a certain drink.

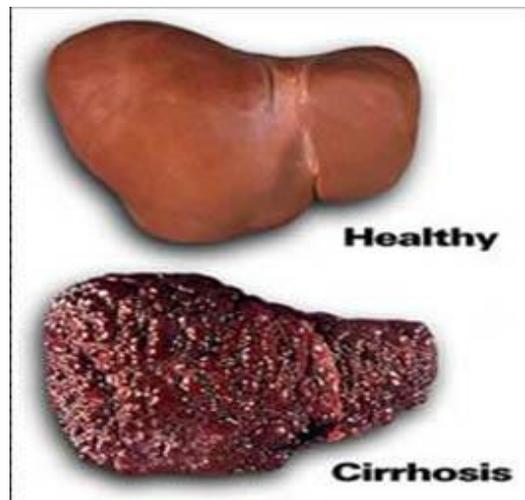
From the second you take your first sip, alcohol starts affecting your body and mind. After one or two drinks you may start feeling more sociable, but drink too much and basic human functions, such as walking and talking become much harder. You might also start saying things you don't mean and behaving out of character. Some of alcohol's effects disappear overnight – while others can stay with you a lot longer, or indeed become permanent.

Here is a list of the effects of alcohol on the body:

- Heart disease
- Cancer – particularly mouth and digestive tract
- Pancreatitis
- Mental Health problems – Depression, violence and relationship breakdown, loss of job, home, family and friends, financial implications
- Impotence in men
- Alcoholic dependence
- Poisoning
- Weight gain
- Liver disease.

If you feel that you have a problem with alcohol then get help from a healthcare professional before it is too late.

Diagram of a healthy and unhealthy liver.



- Continuous heavy drinking can lead to raised blood pressure in all of us, so again try and limit your intake and don't be tempted to binge drink.
- Always ensure that at least one person who you are out with knows that you have diabetes and knows how to react if you should become hypo.
- Never drink and drive.
- High blood glucose levels, even if there are ketones present, will not affect a breathalyser machine.

Handling hangovers

Drink plenty of sugar-free liquids and eat something starchy, such as toast, cereal or bread before going to bed. (Remember not to cook if you are drunk)

If you are suffering the typical hangover symptoms of headache, nausea, shaking and sweating, check your blood glucose level, as you may actually be having a hypo. No matter how awful you feel, you need to treat a hypo straight away. Don't ignore it.

- If you can't face food or if you are being sick, take as much fluid as you can, including some sugary (not diet) drinks.
- Monitor blood glucose levels regularly.
- Never stop taking your insulin. Always have some breakfast to aid blood glucose control.

To accurately work out the number of units in your drink, the following equation can be applied:

$$\frac{\text{ABV} \times \text{volume}}{1000} = \text{number of units} \quad \text{ABV (alcohol by volume)}$$

For example, by using the above equation we can calculate that a pint of lager which has the alcoholic strength of 5.2% AVB will contain three units.

$$\frac{5.2 \times 568}{1000} = 2.95 \text{ (i.e. 3 units)}$$

It is essential that you are aware that alcohol can induce hypoglycaemia (low blood sugars). However as long as your diabetes is well controlled and the recommended daily allowances are taken into consideration, alcohol can be consumed before, during and after a meal without affecting short term blood glucose levels.

Serious hypoglycaemia (hypos) can occur with larger quantities of alcohol, particularly if you are treated with insulin and especially if too little carbohydrate is eaten. You should therefore always ensure that some form of carbohydrate is taken before going to bed, which could include toast, cereal, and sandwiches, although chips or pizza on the way home may be an easier albeit healthier option.

If you are at risk from hypos, it's worth noting that these may occur up to 16 hours after heavy drinking. The liver gets rid of alcohol at the rate of about one unit per hour, but this can vary. So if you drink more than a few units in an evening, you will have an increased risk of a hypo all night and also part of the next day as the liver continues to dispose of the alcohol.

Alcohol also slows down the release of glucose from the liver and glucose is needed if you have a hypo.

It is vital that you keep your blood sugars topped up with carbohydrate and always remember to take something at breakfast. Remember that you may be less aware of hypo symptoms when you are drinking so always ensure that you carry some form of diabetes identification with you as hypos can often be mistaken as being drunk.



Important things to remember when drinking are:

- Never drink on an empty stomach, as the alcohol will be absorbed too quickly into your blood stream.
- Do not substitute alcoholic drinks for your usual meals or snacks as this could lead to hypos.
- Always carry some form of glucose with you.



- All types of alcoholic drinks contain calories and can make you feel hungry, so if you are trying to watch your weight, try to limit your intake.
- If you have neuropathy (nerve damage), drinking alcohol can make it worse and increase the pain, tingling, numbness and other symptoms associated with nerve damage.
- Drinking low carbohydrate drinks like Pils lager and cider offer no benefits as they have a higher alcohol content.
- Low alcoholic drinks still contain alcohol, therefore NEVER drink and drive.
- Low alcohol wines are often higher in sugar than ordinary ones, so if you do choose these, just stick to a glass or two.
- Mixer drinks should be diet or sugar free, such as diet tonic water and diet cola.



Useful contact numbers:

Diabetes Education Centre
01246 512113

Dietetics Department
01246 512173

Appointments
01246 516090

NHS Direct
0845 4647



Chesterfield Royal Hospital



NHS Foundation Trust

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