

Alcohol

Booze, drink, beverage, bevy, swally

Alcohol

Alcoholic drinks consist mainly of flavoured water and ethyl alcohol (ethanol). They are made by the fermentation of fruits, vegetables or grains. Beer, lager and cider are usually about one part ethanol to 20 parts water although some brands may be twice as strong as others. Wine is about twice to four times as strong and distilled spirits such as whisky, rum and gins are about half water and half ethanol.

Below is some information on the relative strengths of various kinds of alcoholic drinks. The term ABV means 'alcohol by volume' or what percentage of the total liquid is actually alcohol.

The unit of alcohol measure is used to determine medical guidelines as to what are supposed to be safe levels of drinking for men and women per week. Safe drinking limits are given as daily maximums.

Authorities recommend that men should drink no more than three to four units a day and women no more than two to three units a day. It is also suggested that having one or two alcohol free days per week is wise.

What is a unit?

One pint of normal strength lager (3 - 3.5%) is equivalent to 2 units

One 275ml bottle of alcopop (5.5%) is 1.5 units

a 175ml glass of 12% wine is 2 units

a single measure of spirits (40%) is 1 unit [1]

These are measures of alcohol as might be bought in a restaurant or pub. Many drinks poured at home will be more generous and so contain more units of alcohol.

Alco pops

Alcopops are alcoholic drinks which do not taste of alcohol such as alcoholic lemonades and fruit juices. Most of these have an ABV of 4 - 5.5% with a range of units from 1.5-1.75 per bottle. The most well-known brands are the alcoholic lemonades and there are also alcoholic colas, fruit flavoured drinks and those using spirits such as vodka and tequila. Some people say they have been deliberately made by companies who make alcohol to get the younger age range to start drinking and to get them to drink more. Drinking alcopops can also make it easier to get drunk without realising it.



Spirits

Most standard 700 ml bottles of whisky, vodka or rum have an ABV of around 40% containing 25-30 units of alcohol.

Wine

Most wines are produced with an ABV of around 10-13% in a standard 750ml bottle containing 7-10 units of alcohol. Wines from hotter climates such as Italian and Californian wines tend to be stronger at 12 to 13% ABV while those from cooler climates such as Germany are usually 8 to 10%. Therefore a regular pub glass (125ml) of 12% wine is the equivalent of roughly 1.5 units. Fortified wines are even stronger, with drinks like Buckfast and Eldorado being as strong as 17%.

Sherry is usually produced with an ABV of 15-20% giving around 13-14 units of alcohol for a typical 750ml bottle

Cider

This varies in strength from the low alcohol varieties such as Strongbow LA with an ABV of just 0.9% up to the white ciders' with an ABV of around 8.4%. Bottles usually contain 330ml; cans 440ml. A can of one of the stronger ciders contains around 2.5-3.5 units of alcohol.

Beer and lager

Most popular types of bitter beer are around 3.5 to 4.1% ABV - giving around 2 -2.25 units for a pint and 1.5 to 1.75 units for a 440 ml can.

The strength of lager beers can vary widely and ranges from very low strength drinks like Barbican

(0.02% ABV) to super strong' lagers at anything up to 10%. But like bitter beers, many popular lagers are around 3.5-4% ABV providing 1.5-1.75 units in a 440ml can and 2-2.25 units in a pint. A different type of alcohol produced from wood (methyl alcohol) is used in methylated spirits and surgical spirit. Some down and out alcoholics ('meths' drinkers) drink this type of alcohol because it is cheap. Methyl alcohol is poisonous and can cause blindness, coma and death.

Unlike most drugs, alcohol has food value and supplies calories. One gram of alcohol supplies seven calories, almost twice the number of calories as one gram of carbohydrate. A pint of beer can supply as many calories as six slices of bread. Beer provides very little protein or vitamin and distilled spirits provide none at all.

Prevalence

Alcohol is our most popular drug. In England in 2004, 74 per cent of men and 59 per cent of women reported drinking an alcoholic drink on at least one day in the week prior to interview. Fifteen per cent of men and 8 per cent of women reported drinking on every day in the previous week. Thirty-nine per cent of men and 22 per cent of women had drunk more than the recommended number of units on at least one day in the week prior to interview Older people were more likely to drink regularly - 30 per cent of men and 19 per cent of women aged 45-64 drank on five or more days in the week prior to interview compared to 8 per cent of men and 5 per cent of women aged 16-24. Younger people were more likely to drink heavily, with 48 per cent of men and 39 per cent of women aged 16-24 drinking above the daily recommendations compared to 19 per cent of men and 5 per cent of women aged 65 and over. In the UK in 2004, 61 per cent of people reported that they had heard of the government guidelines on alcohol intake. [2]

Full statistics at: <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/pubs/alcoholeng2006/statisticsonalcoholpdf/file> (PDF)

Young people drink more alcohol than older people. In the late teens and early twenties alcohol consumption is 40-50% higher. Despite the licensing laws about 60 per cent of 13 -17 year olds have bought alcohol in a pub or off-licence.

The proportion of 11-15-year-olds who drink alcohol at least once a week has risen from 20% in 1988 to 24% in 2000 [3]. Some of this is in the home drinking small amounts. However, many young people also drink in pubs and clubs as well as on the streets or in parks.

Young people tend to get drunk more often, drink more in one session and drink stronger beers, lagers and ciders. The last few years have seen new drinks coming on to the market which are targeted at the younger age group. Extra strong lagers and ciders have been followed by 'alcopops' - drinks with high alcoholic strength which do not taste of alcohol.

The UK has over 80,000 pubs and similar 'on-licensed' premises, over 50,000 off-licenses (an increasing number of which are in supermarkets), plus over 60,000 licensed restaurants and clubs.

Restrictions on advertising alcohol are less stringent than with tobacco. Unlike tobacco, alcohol is regularly advertised on T.V. Adverts are not supposed to be directed at young people, encourage excessive use or to link drink with driving.

History

Making and drinking alcohol goes back many thousands of years to the earliest days of civilisation. This probably first happened in the Middle East where grapes grow wild without cultivation. Alcohol is mentioned in the Old Testament when Noah plants a vine yard after the Flood and becomes drunk. The evils of getting drunk are recorded on Egyptian papyrus from 3500BC. The population of ancient Greece was noted for heavy drinking. In ancient Rome getting drunk was almost a national pastime, and it was an offence to be drunk in charge of a chariot.

Many societies and religions have allowed the use of alcohol. The Roman Catholic and Jewish religions include wine in their ceremonies. However, the Islamic faith (Muslims) and some Christian groups such as the Mormons do not allow the use of alcohol.

For centuries 'ale houses' and beer drinking have been a part of everyday life in Britain. Because of the lack of pure drinking water, beer was commonly the main drink to have with a meal. In the 15th century there was concern that ale houses were meeting places for working class political radicals and magistrates were given powers to close down houses that were seen as causing trouble.

In America the Temperance movement had far more effect. In the early 20th century alcohol was banned in many southern states and in 1919 Prohibition was introduced, banning alcohol in all of America. However, because there was no widespread public support for Prohibition, it did not stop manufacture or drinking of alcohol. Poor quality 'bootleg' alcohol was sold in illegal drinking clubs called 'speakeasies'. These were run by gangsters such as Al Capone and crime and violence flourished. Eventually in 1933 the law which banned alcohol in America was repealed. By then gangs (including the Mafia) had learnt how to make and sell illegal alcohol. Many then switched to drug dealing.

Alcohol is now a major source of government revenue in the UK. In 1999 the tax on a 70cl bottle of spirits was £5.48, £1.12 on a small (75cl) bottle of wine and almost 25 pence on every pint of beer sold [4].

In recent years new alcoholic drinks have been targeted at young people. These have included strong lagers and ciders and 'alcopops', high alcohol content drinks which do not taste of alcohol, such as lemonades. As well as possibly leading to more young people drinking at a younger age this may result in increased drunkenness, with more alcohol being consumed in a short space of time.

The law

The manufacture, sale, distribution and purchase of alcohol is mainly controlled by the 1964 Licensing Act.

There are different licences governing the sale of alcohol. Full 'on licenses' are granted to pubs and clubs and mean alcohol can be drunk on the premises. 'Off licenses' are granted to off-licenses, shops and supermarkets where alcohol cannot be consumed on the premises. 'Restaurant licenses' permit the sale of alcohol and consumption on the premises if accompanied by a meal. Licensing laws also restrict the times at which alcohol can be sold and consumed.

There are also rather complex laws about the age at which people can drink alcohol:

- It is an offence to give alcohol to a child under 5 years old.
- Children of any age can go into parts of pubs that are set aside for meals or as family rooms.
- Children aged over 14 years can go into pubs unaccompanied by adults but cannot be served alcohol until they are 18 years old.
- Young people are not allowed to drink alcohol in a bar or buy alcohol in a pub or off licence until they are 18 years old.
- 16 year olds can buy and drink beer or cider (but not spirits) in a pub but only if they are having a meal.
- There are slightly different rules in different parts of the UK in Northern Ireland, for example, nobody can enter any part of a pub if they are under 18 years old.

Anyone aged under 18 years old who tries to buy alcohol can be fined but this rarely happens. A licensed vendor (pub landlord, off licence proprietor etc.) who knowingly sells alcohol to young people aged under 18 years can be fined and could lose their licence. Licenses have to be approved by magistrates and the police can object if they think vendors are not fit to sell alcohol.

Unlicensed 'home brewing' of beers, ciders and wines (but not spirits) is permitted but it is illegal to sell these products.

Under the Public Order Act 1986, it is an offence to possess or carry alcohol on trains, coaches or minibuses travelling to or from certain sporting events. Police also have powers to confiscate alcohol from under 18s, if they are drinking on the streets. Some cities, such as Bath and Coventry, have introduced by-laws making it an offence to drink alcohol on the streets in city centre areas at any age.

It is an offence to be drunk and disorderly in a public place, including within licensed premises. It is also an offence to drive whilst unfit to do so because of drink. Anything more than 80mg of alcohol in every 100ml of blood is over the legal limit. This usually works out at about two and a half pints of normal strength beer for males but varies from person to person and is usually less for females.

Effects/risks

Alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream and starts to have an effect within 5 to 10 minutes. The effect can last for several hours, depending on the amount consumed. The effect will also depend on:

- how quickly it is drunk, whether there is food in the stomach and the person's body weight.
- how used to drinking someone is, in other words, what their tolerance is to alcohol.
- how people feel before they are drinking. People who feel relaxed and in a good mood are less likely to become aggressive. Some people 'drown their sorrows' in drink and find they feel worse than ever after.

After about two pints of beer most people feel less inhibited and more relaxed. Alcohol is a depressant drug. It acts on the central nervous system to slow the body down. Some people become aggressive and argumentative, especially men. A lot of violence on the streets and in the home (much of it directed at women and children) happens after people have been drinking.

After about 4 pints of average strength beer, drinkers become uncoordinated and slur their speech.

Drinking alcohol makes accidents more common, especially when people fall over, drive or are operating machinery. Lowering of inhibitions can make it more likely that people will put themselves in sexual situations which they later regret. They are also less likely to practice safer sex and use condoms if they have intercourse. Drinking too much in one go can lead to losing consciousness and death by choking on vomit.

Alcohol can also be very dangerous to take in combination with other drugs, especially other depressant drugs such as barbiturates, heroin, methadone or tranquillisers and drugs such as anti-depressants, anti-histamines and painkillers. Mixing these drugs and alcohol has led to many fatal overdoses.

Long term, heavy drinking can be very damaging. Physical dependence and tolerance develop so people drink more and more and suffer withdrawal symptoms (such as trembling, sweating, anxiety and delirium) if they try to stop. At this point people will be regarded as alcoholics. Heavy, long term drinking can also lead to damage to the heart, liver, stomach and brain and lead to obesity.

Pregnant women who drink six or more units of alcohol a day may give birth to babies who suffer withdrawal symptoms and also have facial abnormalities and possible retarded physical and mental development which together is called foetal alcohol syndrome. However such cases are rare in the UK. Lesser degrees of drinking during pregnancy may result in a baby being born with a low birth weight but there is little evidence that moderate drinking during pregnancy causes harm to the mother or her baby. See the Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Aware UK site for much more on this

Excessive drinking commonly aggravates personal, family, work and financial problems and contributes towards family breakdown, violence and other forms of crime associated with loss of control.

The number of alcohol related deaths (where alcohol is mentioned on the death certificate) has increased almost every year since 1979. Numbers of deaths more than doubled in this period from 2,506 in 1979 to 5,543 in 2000 [5] A higher figure of 22,000 people is the estimate for the number of deaths where alcohol is a contributory factor (e.g. in accidents). [6]

See the website of Alcohol Concern for the latest news and reports on alcohol use in the UK.

References

- [1] Source: [Factsheet 8. Health Impacts of Alcohol](#). Alcohol Concern, Winter 2002/2003.
- [2] Source: [UK. The Information Centre: Statistical Bulletin](#). Statistics on Alcohol: England, 2006.
- [3] Source: [Young People and Alcohol](#). Wired for Health, 2003.
- [4] Source: [The Revenue Effect of Changing Alcohol Duties](#). IFS, 1999.
- [5] Source: [Health Statistics Quarterly, 17](#). HMSO, Spring 2003.
- [6] Source: [Interim Analytical Report](#). Strategy Unit Alcohol Harm Reduction Project, 2004.

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Other Sources of information

<p>Local organisations that offer Assessment & Treatment options for people with addictions:</p> <p>EDAS – Mental Health and Alcohol & Substance Misuse Support in Poole Tel 01202 735777 hello@edasuk.org www.edasuk.org</p> <p>EDAS/REACH YP – Free and confidential drug and alcohol service for under 25s who live in the Borough of Poole and County of Dorset Tel 0800 0434656 www.edasuk.org/yp</p> <p>WE ARE WITH YOU Tel 01202558855 www.wearewithyou.org.uk</p> <p>EDP Tel 01305 571264 info@edp.org.uk</p>		<p>National organisations that offer treatment, advice, information & support for people with addictions:</p> <p>ALCOHOL CHANGE Tel 020 3907 8480 www.alcoholchange.org.uk</p> <p>FRANK Tel 0300 1236600 Text 82111 www.talktofrank.com</p>
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