



Department
of Health

How to keep health risks from drinking alcohol to a low level: public consultation on proposed new guidelines

January 2016

Introduction

1. At the request of the UK Chief Medical Officers, a group of experts has been looking at the advice the Chief Medical Officers give to the public about how to keep risks to health low from drinking alcohol. The group have looked at the large amount of evidence about the levels and types of health harm that alcohol can cause, depending on how much and how often people drink. They have used this to make some recommendations about how you can limit your own risks from drinking alcohol.
2. The Chief Medical Officers provide scientific, medical advice to their governments and to the public in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The Chief Medical Officers have accepted the advice from the expert group as the basis for their new guidelines across the UK.
3. The Chief Medical Officers would like to know whether you think their recommendations, and the reasons behind them, are clear and easy to understand. That is the purpose of this questionnaire. We are trying to make sure that the new guidelines are as practical and useful as possible.
4. We are not asking for your thoughts on the scientific evidence or how the expert group has used it to decide on their recommendations, although, if you are interested in knowing more about it, the evidence and more details of the group's thinking are being published at the same time as this questionnaire.
5. This questionnaire is only one of the ways we are testing these guidelines. They will also be tested by interviewing people individually and in groups to see what they think.
6. Information explaining alcohol 'units' can be found later in the Annex to this document.
7. We would like to know whether you find the recommendations, and the reasons behind them, clear and helpful. Please read the questionnaire and the separate document "Summary of the proposed guidelines" then fill in the answers to the questions and return your completed questionnaire either by completing this online or by sending it by post to: Alcohol Policy team, Department of Health, Wellington House, 133 - 155 Waterloo Road, SE1 8UG.
8. **Weekly guideline for regular drinking** [*this applies for people who drink regularly or frequently i.e. most weeks*]

The Chief Medical Officers' guideline for both men and women is that:

- You are safest not to drink regularly more than 14 units per week, to keep health risks from drinking alcohol to a low level.
- If you do drink as much as 14 units per week, it is best to spread this evenly over 3 days or more. If you have one or two heavy drinking sessions, you increase your risks of death from long term illnesses and from accidents and injuries.
- The risk of developing a range of illnesses (including, for example, cancers of the mouth, throat and breast) increases with any amount you drink on a regular basis.
- If you wish to cut down the amount you're drinking, a good way to help achieve this is to have several drink-free days each week.

The weekly guideline as a whole

1. *Is the weekly guideline for regular drinking as a whole, along with the explanation in the 'Summary of the proposed guidelines', clear and understandable?*

Yes

No

If you answered "No" above, please explain here how you think the guideline or the explanation could be improved [please keep within 300 words].

Individual parts of the weekly guideline

Guideline: You are safest not to drink regularly more than 14 units per week, to keep health risks from drinking alcohol to a low level

Explanation (from 'Summary of the proposed guidelines')

13. Long term health risks arise from regularly drinking alcohol over time – so it may be ten to twenty years or more before the diseases caused by alcohol occur. Drinking regularly over time can lead to a wide range of illnesses including cancers, strokes, heart disease, liver disease, and damage to the brain and nervous system.

14. This advice on regular drinking is based on the evidence that if people did drink regularly at or above the low risk level advised, overall any protective effect from alcohol on deaths is overridden, and the risk of dying from an alcohol-related condition would be expected to be around, or a little under, 1% over a lifetime. This level of risk is comparable to risks from some other regular or routine activities.

15. The expert group took account not only of the risk of death from drinking regularly but also the risk of suffering from various alcohol-related chronic diseases and cancers. The group also carried out analyses to test the robustness of their conclusions and considered carefully the uncertainties in the available research. They took account of all these factors in their advice.

2. *Is it clear what the guideline – along with the explanation – means, for how you can seek to reduce long term risks to your health from alcohol? Is the explanation for how the weekly guideline was chosen clear?*

Yes

No

If you answered “No” above, please explain here how the advice could be made clearer [please keep within 200 words].

Guideline: If you do drink as much as 14 units per week, it is best to spread this evenly over 3 days or more. If you have one or two heavy drinking sessions, you increase your risks of death from long term illnesses and from accidents and injuries

Explanation (from ‘Summary of the proposed guidelines’)

16. The expert group believes that a weekly guideline on regular drinking requires an additional recommendation, concerning the need to avoid harmful regular heavy drinking episodes, as there is clear evidence that such a pattern of heavy drinking on a small number of days increases risks to health.

3. *Is it clear what the guideline – along with the explanation – means, for how you can keep your health risks within a low level, if you drink on only a few days each week?*

Yes

No

If you answered “No” above, please explain here how the advice could be made clearer [please keep within 200 words].

Guideline: The risk of developing a range of illnesses (including, for example, cancers of the mouth, throat and breast) increases with any amount you drink on a regular basis

Explanation (from 'Summary of the proposed guidelines')

17. The expert group was also quite clear that there are a number of serious diseases, including certain cancers, that can be caused even when drinking less than 14 units weekly; and whilst they judge the risks to be low, this means there is no level of regular drinking that can be considered as completely safe. These are risks that people can reduce further, by choosing to drink less than the weekly guideline, or not to drink at all, if they wish.

4. *Is it clear what the guideline – along with the explanation – means? Is it clear how you could, if you wish, reduce your long term health risks below the low risk level set by the guideline?*

Yes

No

If you answered “No” above, please explain here how the advice could be made clearer [please keep within 200 words].

Guideline: If you wish to cut down the amount you're drinking, a good way to help achieve this is to have several drink-free days each week

Explanation (from 'Summary of the proposed guidelines')

18. There is evidence that adopting alcohol free days is a way that drinkers who wish to moderate their consumption can find useful.

5. *Is it clear what the guideline – along with the explanation – means and how you could use this if you wished to reduce your drinking?*

Yes

No

If you answered “No” above, please explain here how the advice could be made clearer [please keep within 200 words].

Single occasions of drinking *[this applies for drinking on any single occasion, not regular drinking, which is covered by the weekly guideline].*

Advice on short term effects of alcohol

The Chief Medical Officers advise men and women who wish to keep their short term health risks from a single drinking occasion to a low level that they can reduce these risks by:

- limiting the total amount of alcohol you drink on any occasion;
- drinking more slowly, drinking with food, and alternating with water;
- avoiding risky places and activities, making sure you have people you know around, and ensuring you can get home safely.

The sorts of things that are more likely to happen if you don't judge the risks from how you drink correctly can include: accidents resulting in injury (causing death in some cases), misjudging risky situations, and losing self-control.

These risks can arise for people drinking within the weekly guidelines for regular drinking, if they drink too much or too quickly on a single occasion; and for people who drink at higher levels, whether regularly or infrequently.

Some groups of people are likely to be affected more by alcohol and should be more careful of their level of drinking on any one occasion:

- young adults
- older people
- those with low body weight
- those with other health problems
- those on medicines or other drugs

As well as the risk of accident and injury, drinking alcohol regularly is linked to long term risks such as heart disease, cancer, liver disease, and epilepsy.

Explanation (from 'Summary of the proposed guidelines')

19. This advice for any single occasion of drinking is based on the evidence reviewed by the expert group that clearly identified substantially increased risk of short term harms (accidents, injuries and even deaths) faced by people from any single drinking occasion.

20. Short term' risks are the immediate risks of injury and accident (sometimes fatal) linked to drinking, usually heavy drinking, on one occasion, often linked to drunkenness. They include:

- *head injuries*
- *fractures*
- *facial injuries and*
- *scarring*

21. Short term risks from heavy drinking in a short time also include alcohol poisoning and conditions such as heart disease. The risks of short term, or acute, injury to a person recently drinking have been found to rise as much as 2- to 5-fold (or more) from drinking just 5-7 units (over a 3- or 6-hour period).

22. The proposed advice includes a number of different ways people can keep their risks low. Whilst this does include limiting how much and how fast you drink, it also advises on other actions that people can take to reduce their risk of injury and accident.

6. *Is the advice – along with the explanation – on single occasions of drinking clear? Do you understand what you could do to limit health risks from any single occasion of drinking?*

Yes

No

If you answered "No" above, please explain your view here [please keep within 200 words].

[extracted from the above]

The Chief Medical Officers advise men and women who wish to keep their short term health risks from a single drinking occasion to a low level that they can reduce these risks by:

- **limiting the total amount of alcohol you drink on any occasion;**
- **drinking more slowly, drinking with food, and alternating with water;**
- **avoiding risky places and activities, making sure you have people you know around, and ensuring you can get home safely.**

Explanation (from 'Summary of the proposed guidelines')

23. The expert group considered it was important to make the scale of this risk clear to the public, and it is spelled out in their report. But, unlike for the regular drinking guideline, they did not recommend a guideline based on a number of units. There were a number of reasons for this, not least because:

- *individual variation in short term risks can be significant;*
- *the actual risk faced by any particular person can also be substantially altered by a number of factors, including how fast they drink, how alcohol tends to affect their skills and inhibitions, how safe their environment is, and any plans they have made in advance to reduce their risks (such as staying around someone they can trust and planning safe transport home).*

24. Nevertheless, the expert group has recognised that, to be most effective, any guidelines should be consistent with the principles of SMART goal setting, in particular they should be: *Specific, measurable and timebound*. Guidelines need to be precise about the behaviours that are being encouraged or discouraged. We are therefore, seeking views in the consultation on whether, as an alternative, to set a numerical unit level for this advice. Any numerical unit level would be determined in large part by further consideration of the health evidence.

7. For the advice on single occasions of drinking, the expert group considered, but did not finally recommend, suggesting a specific number of units that you shouldn't drink more than on any occasion or day, for example, 7 units. They did not recommend this, for the reasons described in the box.

However, there is evidence that it can be easier to follow advice with a simple number than to follow more general advice. If the health evidence justifies it, would you prefer advice on single occasions to be expressed in units?

Yes

No

Please explain your view here [please keep within 200 words].

Guideline on pregnancy and drinking

The Chief Medical Officers' guideline is that:

- **If you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, the safest approach is not to drink alcohol at all, to keep risks to your baby to a minimum.**
- **Drinking in pregnancy can lead to long-term harm to the baby, with the more you drink the greater the risk.**

Most women either do not drink alcohol (19%) or stop drinking during pregnancy (40%).

The risk of harm to the baby is likely to be low if a woman has drunk only small amounts of alcohol before she knew she was pregnant or during pregnancy.

Women who find out they are pregnant after already having drunk during early pregnancy, should avoid further drinking, but should be aware that it is unlikely in most cases that their baby has been affected. If you are worried about how much you have been drinking when pregnant, talk to your doctor or midwife.

Explanation (from 'Summary of the proposed guidelines')

25. The expert group found that the evidence supports a 'precautionary' approach and that the guidance should be clear that it is safest to avoid drinking in pregnancy.

26. Alcohol can have a wide range of differing impacts. These include a range of lifelong conditions, known under the umbrella term of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD). The level and nature of the conditions under this term relate to the amount drunk and the developmental stage of the fetus at the time. Research on the effects on a baby of low levels of drinking in pregnancy can be complex. The risks are probably low, but we can't be sure that this is completely safe.

27. Drinking heavily during pregnancy can cause a baby to develop fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). FAS is a serious condition, in which children have:

- *restricted growth*
- *facial abnormalities*
- *learning and behavioural disorders, which are long lasting and may be lifelong*

28. Drinking lesser amounts than this either regularly during pregnancy or in episodes of heavier drinking (binge drinking), is associated with a group of conditions within FASD that are effectively lesser forms of problems seen with FAS. These conditions include physical, mental and behavioural features including learning disabilities which can have lifelong implications. The risk of such problems is likely to be greater the more you drink.

29. Recent reviews have shown that the risks of low birth weight, preterm birth, and being small for gestational age all may increase in mothers drinking above 1-2 units/day during pregnancy. Women who wished to stay below those levels would need to be particularly careful to avoid under-estimating their actual consumption. The safer option is not to drink alcohol at all during pregnancy.

30. The proposed guideline takes account of the known harmful actions of alcohol on the fetus; the evidence for the level of risk from drinking; the need for suitable clarity and simplicity in providing meaningful advice for women; and the importance of continuing with a precautionary approach on low levels of drinking when the evidence for its safety is not robust enough.

8. *Is the guideline on pregnancy and drinking clear? Do you understand what a pregnant women should do to keep risks to her baby to a minimum?*

Yes

No

If you answered “No” above, please explain your view [please keep within 200 words].

9. *In recommending this guideline, the expert group aimed for:*

- *a precautionary approach to minimising avoidable risks to babies;*
- *openness about uncertainties in the evidence, particularly on the effects of low levels of drinking in pregnancy;*
- *reasonable reassurance for women who may discover they have drunk alcohol before knowing they were pregnant.*

Has the guideline met these aims?

Yes

No

If you answered “No” above, please explain your view [please keep within 200 words].

Annex

What is a unit of alcohol?

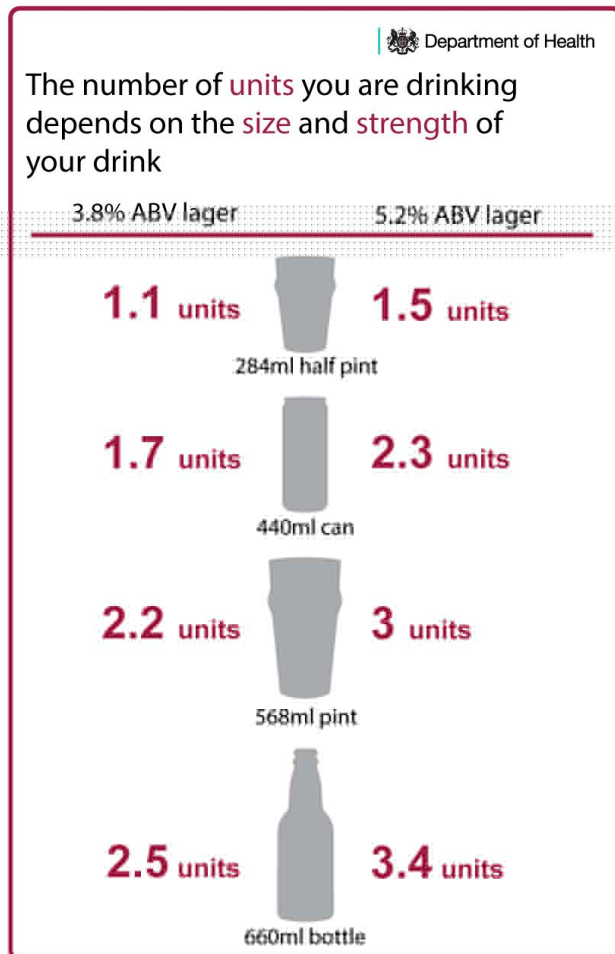
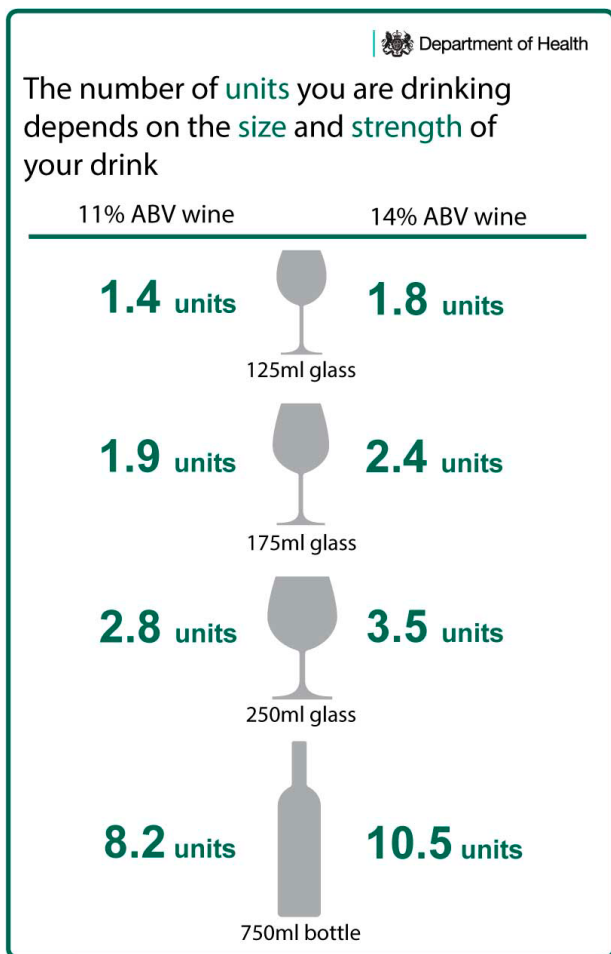
A unit is a measure of the pure alcohol in a drink, that is, the amount of alcohol that would be left if other substances were removed. A unit is 10ml, or one hundredth of a litre of pure alcohol. Units are calculated by reference to:

- the amount or volume of the drink
- the alcoholic strength (Alcohol by Volume, or ABV)

So, a one litre bottle of whisky at 40% ABV has 400ml, or 40 units of alcohol [1000ml x 40% = 400ml or 40 units].

A unit is roughly half a pint of normal strength lager (4.1% ABV). Alcoholic content in beer can vary. Some ales are 3.5%. But stronger continental lagers can be 5% ABV, or even 6% or more.

The following example shows how units in wine and beer vary by the size of the drink (glass or bottle) and the alcoholic strength.





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