

## Fact Sheet

# Alcohol

**AKA:** booze, bevvie, juice, sauce, alcopops, beer, wines, spirits, The alcohol found in alcoholic beverages is ethyl alcohol (ethanol).

**SOURCE:** Alcohol is easily produced through fermentation of fruit or grain mixtures or the distillation of fermented fruit or grain mixtures (Spirits such as whiskey, rum, vodka and gin are distilled.)

Alcohol is sold via licensed outlets such as supermarkets, off licenses and bars.

**APPEARANCE:** Ethanol is a clear liquid which will have a distinctive smell. Once combined with flavourings and colours, it can take many forms - familiar to most people from the supermarket shelves and pubs. These include a vast array of alcoholic beverages and jellified products such as vodka jelly.

**COSTS:** Alcoholic drinks range in price from under £1 for cheap lagers through to many thousands for expensive wine.

**Strength:** Alcohol strength is measured as ABV (alcohol by volume), by the 'Unit.' The older measure of "proof" has largely been phased out. ABV is the most frequent form of labelling and is shown as a percentage. So a drink that is marked as 5% ABV means that 1000ml of the drink would contain 50ml of alcohol.

A Unit of alcohol is equal to 10ml of pure ethanol. In practice the number of units quoted in a drink is an approximate figure based on the approximate size of the drink and the strength of the ingredients used. The figures below look at the most common drinks. Where a person is pouring or mixing their own drinks, it becomes much harder to accurately count units.

Product	ABV(%)	Volume	Units (approx)
Wine	12%	Standard Glass (125mls)	1.5 Units
	13%	Bottle (750mls)	10 Units
Spirits	37.5%	25mls (small single)	.9 Unit
	40%	35ml (large single)	1.4 Units
Alcopops	5.5%	275ml	1.5 Units
Beer	3%	1 Pint	2 Units
	5%	1 Pint	2.8 Units
	9%	440ml can	4 Units
Cider	5%	1 Pint	2.8 Units
	8.5%	275ml bottle	2.3 Units
		2 litre bottle	17 Units

To accurately estimate drink strengths by unit use the amazing Unit Calculator at <http://www.cleavebooks.co.uk/scol/ccalcoh2.htm>

## Safe(r) Drinking Limits:

The current safe drinking levels are as follows:

Women:	2-3 units a day or less:	14-21 units/week	no significant risks
	3-5 units per day:	21-35 units/week	moderate risk
	5+/day	35+	high risk
Men:	3-4 units a day or less:	21-28 units/week	no significant risks
	4-5 units per day:	28-35 units/week	moderate risk
	5+/day	35+	high risk

**Patterns of use:** Both constant drinking and binge drinking are unhealthy. It is safer to aim for at least two alcohol-free days per week; a person who is finding it difficult to achieve this may want to seek assistance to moderate their drinking.

Binge drinking (more than eight units for men and six units for women is a UK interpretation) is associated with heart and circulatory problems such as high blood pressure.

**The Liver and Units of Alcohol:** The liver of an average healthy male can remove approximately one unit of alcohol from the blood stream. While this alcohol is being metabolised, the rest remains in circulation. This means that if, between 8 and 12pm a person drank two bottles of wine, it would take at least twenty hours for all the alcohol to be metabolised out. Drinkers may well have excessive levels of alcohol in the blood-stream the day after a heavy nights drinking.

Women, people with impaired liver function and people of small build will generally metabolise alcohol more slowly, get drunk faster and sober up more slowly. Women may also find that tolerance to alcohol decreases during just prior to the start of menstruation.

**METHODS OF USE:** Alcohol is generally drunk in liquid form; it is also eaten and used in cooking. When heated, most alcohol is evaporated away; however, alcohol can be eaten in cold products such as jelly.

Alcohol is also sometimes used in other ways such as via snorting it, injecting it or attempting to absorb it via the eye. These methods are invariably painful, and while young people may attempt to snort alcohol or eyeball it, such efforts are rarely pursued. Recently, companies have tried to promote 'alcohol with oxygen' a machine that allows alcohol to be breathed in via a face mask and absorbed in the lungs. Such a method means that alcohol initially bypasses the stomach and the liver, so gets intoxicated more quickly. However, such equipment in bars falls foul of licensing laws and so has not become more widespread.

Injecting alcohol is quite unusual. Young people in the course of drugs experimentation sometimes do it. Otherwise it is users with long injecting habits who may undertake this painful activity.

**EFFECTS:** Onset of alcohol will depend on the strength of the drink, previous food intake, other substances used and the user's general build and metabolism.

Alcohol is primarily a depressant drug - making the person more drowsy and moving them towards sleep and unconsciousness.

However, early on it can act as a euphoriant, elevating levels of the brain chemicals serotonin and dopamine. This makes the person more animated, lively and talkative. As more alcohol is taken in, the depressant effects can become more marked as reactions and muscular control are impeded.

At higher doses, the drinker may become more drowsy, with slurred speech, difficulty standing and stupor. Finally, the person may become unconscious.

People experience a wide range of different moods when drinking; some people describe feeling happier, while others become less happy and more withdrawn; others may become aggressive. To some extent, alcohol may act as a mood amplifier, exacerbating a mood or state that was already there. Others would argue that alcohol reveals underlying personality traits, and the rest argue that different drinks affect people in different ways.

Alcohol can also cause nausea, vomiting, excessive urination, impaired memory and judgement.

Drinking too much can also lead to alcohol poisoning, which can be fatal, and according to the National Drugs Helpline, over 1,000 people under the age of 15 are admitted to hospital each year with alcoholic poisoning and all require emergency treatment.

Many alcohol users will be familiar with the 'hangover' which is a symptom of excessive alcohol use. The symptoms tend to include nausea, aches in the lower back, headaches, sensitivity to light and sound and a general sense of feeling unwell. These symptoms result from high levels of dehydration, brain chemistry adjusting to absence of alcohol, irritation of stomach, swelling of the liver and removal of toxins from the blood.

**HEALTH IMPLICATIONS:** Excessive use of alcohol can have a devastating impact on health. Alcohol is associated with:

- Stomach problems: cancers of the stomach, ulcers, gastritis
- High blood pressure, weight gain, circulatory and nervous system problems
- Brain damage, heart disease, damage to the liver, cancers of the mouth and throat

Alcohol use during pregnancy can damage the foetus and, exceptionally, can lead to a set of birth defects known as "foetal alcohol syndrome."

Alcohol use can lead to physical and psychological dependency. Regular use leads to tolerance where more alcohol is required to achieve intoxication.

Withdrawal from alcohol can be physically and mentally difficult; given its high social acceptance, remains a hard drug to avoid in daily life. It can cause serious physical symptoms in withdrawal.

Alcohol is also a key factor in many social and industrial accidents, and a contributory factor in many fights and domestic incidents.

Alcohol is directly associated with between 50-70,000 deaths per year.

**LEGAL STATUS:** Alcohol is covered by licensing laws and other regulations as follows:

Under 5: It is illegal to give alcohol to a child under five years old in any circumstances excepting on the orders of a doctor.

5+: It is legal for children over the age of five to drink alcohol on private premises, such as in the home.

14+: Young people between the ages of fourteen and seventeen may be in a bar during opening hours but may not buy, be bought or drink alcohol on the premises.

16+: Young people sixteen and seventeen years of age may buy or be bought certain drinks in licensed premises but only in a separate eating area and only for consumption with a meal. The permitted drinks in England and Wales are beer, cider and perry. In Scotland, they may also purchase and consume wine with the meal.

Under 18: It is illegal for any person under eighteen years of age to buy any alcohol from an off licence, attempt to buy alcohol or for someone else to buy it in order to supply it to someone under the age of 18.

**Confiscation of Alcohol (young Persons) Act 1997:** Empowers police to require under 18-s to hand over alcohol in a public place. Failure to do so (without reasonable cause) and give name and address when requested summary offence and carries power of arrest.

Other: Local by-laws re. Public drinking; many areas prohibit this and this can lead to a fine; Drunk and disorderly, Drink driving, Drunk in charge of a vehicle.

**OTHER INFORMATION:** Alcohol is a widely used drug, and there is increasing concern about the impact that excessive drinking, especially binge drinking amongst young people is likely to have.

While there is a great deal of attention paid to drugs like heroin, it should be stressed that far more people will become ill or die due to alcohol than to all the controlled drugs put together.