

## What can I do?

Many older people are unaware of the fact that there are recommended limits for drinking. Bear in mind that these are maximum amounts for fit and healthy individuals and older people should aim to drink less than that.

Try to change your daily routines to help you avoid drinking situations. It can be helpful to take part in activities which don't involve alcohol.

## Here are some ideas:

- Spend more time with people who don't drink or drink very little – meet friends or join a club of some sort.
- Take up a new hobby or interest.
- If you've been drinking to help you with one of the difficulties mentioned overleaf, speak to your doctor for advice on how to cope.
- Try having a warm drink, rather than an alcoholic one, to help you sleep.
- Avoid alcohol if you're ill or feeling cold.

**If you do feel that you may have an alcohol-related problem, you should seek help.**

## Where can I get help?

You may feel that it could be awkward asking for help with your drinking. But the earlier you do something about it, the easier it will be to achieve success. Here are some examples of people who will listen to you and try to help:

Talk to a family member or friend you can trust. Perhaps they could also support you if you intend to visit your doctor or a specialist alcohol helper.

Talk to your doctor.

Contact your local alcohol counselling agency – look under “alcohol” in the phone book or contact Alcohol Focus Scotland for your nearest agency.

Contact the national alcohol helpline, Drinkline on **0800 7 314 314**.

Contact Age Concern on **0845 833 0200**.

Local agency details:



Alcohol Focus Scotland  
2nd Floor 166 Buchanan Street Glasgow G1 2LW

**Tel:** 0141 572 6700 **Email:** [enquiries@alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk)  
[www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk](http://www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk)

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## Alcohol and Older People



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[www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk](http://www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk)

## Should older people drink at all?

In Scotland, the majority of adults drink alcohol. Most of us enjoy doing so, and that includes older people. For many older people, there is little risk in drinking a little alcohol. However, there are reasons why older people should be particularly careful with alcohol.

As we get older, most of us start to drink less than we used to. Some of us may decide not to drink at all. In late middle age and older, growing ill health is another reason why we might cut down or stop drinking. On the other hand, in later life some of us may continue to drink much as we have done for years. Others may drink even more than before.

It's important to remember, however, that our ability to handle alcohol diminishes in later life.

## How much is too much?

It's not just a matter of how much we drink. The situation in which we drink may lead to problems even if we only drink a small amount. It's also a question of why we drink.

### Here are some reasons why an older person might rely on alcohol to get by:

- Drinking heavily for many years already.
- Feeling bored, perhaps because of retirement or loss of previous family responsibilities.
- Feeling lonely or depressed, due to retirement or death of a loved one.
- Suffering pain or discomfort, due to conditions such as arthritis.
- Less able to get out and about, or fear of going out alone.
- Having difficulty sleeping.

- Trying to keep warm or to reduce heating bills.
- Finding it easier than preparing meals – although it doesn't have any food value, alcohol is a source of calories and also reduces appetite.

**Do you recognise any of these in yourself? If so, you should definitely consider changing your drinking habits.**

## What are the risks for an older person?

- As we get older, our bodies have a larger proportion of fat to water. This means that the effects of alcohol are increased because it is more concentrated in the body.
- Also, the rate at which alcohol is broken down in the body is slowed down. This causes alcohol to circulate for longer, so the effects last longer.
- As we grow older, the liver becomes more easily damaged by alcohol.
- Some older people suffer difficulties with their memory, balance or co-ordination. These can become worse when they drink alcohol. This can lead to hazards such as leaving the gas on, forgetting to lock the door, or having a fall.
- We may forget to eat properly or look after our health if we drink too much or too often. Drinking heavily plus not eating well can lead to permanent and severe memory loss.
- A lonely or isolated person may spend long periods drinking alone in the home.
- Drinking too much can lead to urinary incontinence.
- Drinking alcohol actually leads to heat loss in the body, increasing the risk of hypothermia when a lot of alcohol is consumed.

- Drinking a lot costs money and can lead to financial difficulties.
- People who take medicines have to be particularly careful as alcohol can seriously interfere with their effects. In particular, sedatives, tranquilisers, sleeping pills, painkillers and cold cures can be dangerous when taken with alcohol. Before drinking alcohol, always check first with your doctor or pharmacist.

## Sensible limits

**Men:** No more than 3-4 units a day and no more than 21 units in a week.

**Women:** No more than 2-3 units a day and no more than 14 units a week.

We all need at least 2 days a week without alcohol. Doctors agree that drinking more than the sensible limit damages health in the short and long term.

## How many units in a drink?

	330ml bottle standard lager/beer:	1.7 units
	700ml bottle whisky:	28 units
	275ml bottle alcopop:	1.5 units
	1 pint standard lager/beer:	2.3 units
	175ml glass standard wine:	2.1 units
	1 pint strong cider:	3.4 units
	35ml measure gin/rum/vodka/whisky:	1.4 units
	1 pint medium strength lager/beer:	2.8 units