

Advice for heavy drinkers who are thinking about cutting back or stopping drinking alcohol



► Is this advice for me?

This advice is intended to help you understand your drinking levels and avoid any serious alcohol withdrawal symptoms, should you plan to reduce or stop your drinking in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We want to help you cut back in a planned way in order to improve your health in the short and long term.

It is important that you know that both the risks of continuing a high level of drinking and of harms from cutting back are higher, the more heavily you drink. If there are alcohol support services available and you are planning to reduce your drinking, you should use these, particularly if you are drinking over 30 units per day, which is around a bottle of spirits, 3 bottles of wine, 7 cans of strong lager (7.5% or more) or 4 litres of white cider. Withdrawal symptoms and complications are more likely at this very high level of consumption.

The support available from NHS and other services to help with alcohol detox and reduction for people who wish to do this will be reduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, though some services will be able to provide telephone and online advice. There is further information at the end of this guidance.

This advice is to help you, your families and friends self-manage alcohol reduction and/or withdrawal as safely as possible. If you are on your own with children, you will need extra support. If possible, you should speak to any professional who is supporting your family and get advice from your local addiction service before you start to cut down.

▶ **When is the right time to cut down or stop alcohol?**

The decision about whether the time is right to make any change to your drinking is up to you. You may decide to keep going as you have been, try to cut back or to stop.

Many heavy dependent drinkers, similar to tobacco smokers, find it is easier in the long run to quit altogether and the first step towards that is gradual reduction, as explained in this guidance.

If you are currently feeling unwell, particularly if you have a fever, the risks to your health from drinking and from cutting back are greater and you should seek medical advice. If you have liver disease or another chronic illness, your health is likely to benefit from reducing or stopping drinking, but you should seek advice from your specialist service if your condition is unstable.



▶ **What withdrawal symptoms may I notice?**

The most common symptoms of withdrawal are sweating, shaking, and feeling sick and anxious. These typically last around a week. Occasionally, more serious symptoms occur which need medical help, but approaching detoxing in an organised way can help reduce your risks and is beneficial for your health in the long term. People who drink in bouts of a few days with frequent days with no alcohol at all, usually do not experience problematic withdrawal from drinking.



'The most common symptoms of withdrawal are sweating, shaking, and feeling sick and anxious.'

► What are the more serious symptoms of withdrawal to look out for?

In more severe cases alcohol withdrawal can cause:

- Seizures (fits) even if you have not had one before;
- Hallucinations (seeing, hearing or feeling things that aren't there);
- Confusion (about where you are, what time it is, who you are with);
- Poor coordination and unsteadiness on your feet.

⚠ If you experience any of the above, please call 111 for urgent medical attention.

► Am I at risk of having alcohol withdrawal symptoms?

- Do you drink over 15 units of alcohol every day? (This is around a ½ bottle of spirits, 1½ bottles of wine, 6 pints of regular strength beer, 3 cans of super lager or 2 litres of strong cider)
- Have you had withdrawal symptoms in the past when cutting back or stopping alcohol (symptoms sometimes take up to a few days to start)
- Do you drink alcohol soon after you waken up to relieve shakes, or sweats?

Each of these is equivalent to 15 units of alcohol



⚠ If you fall into any or all of the above categories, it is likely you will need to do some planning if you want to stop or cut down your drinking. If you do intend to do this, get support from family, friends or services if you can.

'approaching detoxing in an organised way can help reduce your risks'

▶ Step 1: Assessing your alcohol consumption

The first step is to work out your typical daily intake. You may know this already or easily be able to work it out from your buying routine.

If you are unsure, keeping a diary of your drinking should help. Remember to include morning, afternoon and evening drinking. Be as accurate as you can. You might find it useful to draw up your own drinks diary to monitor how you're doing. A typical drinks diary to monitor your progress could look something like this:

Goal: Assess how much you are drinking								
Record what you are drinking until you have a good idea of a typical day. May not take 7 days.								
Start date	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	

Goal: Reduction period								
Cut back slowly. Aim for a bit of progress each day. May take more than 8 days.								
Start date	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8

Goal: Stabilisation period								
Set a goal for yourself, which might be no drinking. No more than <input type="text"/> drinks on any day and <input type="text"/> days per week								
Start date	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8

Further guidance on keeping a drinks diary is available here:

www.healthscotland.scot/media/2903/drinks-diary-nov2019-english.pdf

If you drink a combination of drinks, for instance, beer through the day and wine at night, use a drink calculator to work out your overall typical daily intake in units: <https://count14.scot/#unit-calculator>. If you are going to reduce your drinking in a planned and gradual way, it is usually easier to use only one type of drink, so try to decide which drink will be the easiest for you to reduce and stop.

Tell a trusted friend or family member what your typical daily intake is. Even if you are not planning to make any changes to your drinking now, this may be important information for people involved in your care in the future.



▶ **Step 2: Making a plan for alcohol detox or reduction**

Once you have worked out your typical intake, stick at that level for around 3 days and monitor how you feel, looking out for shakes and sweating. If at this level you are already experiencing symptoms it may be that you have underestimated how much you were drinking. Keep a note of what times of day are most difficult for you.

If you have decided to quit, set a day to start your reduction. Tell some trusted people that you are doing this and keep in contact with them. Ensure that you have food and other necessities in the house for at least 7 days. If you are in touch with an Alcohol Worker let them know so they can provide you with more support and advice.

You are aiming for a “soft landing” so the important thing is to reduce each day at a pace that is manageable for you. Better to make a bit of progress each day than to try to go too fast, find it hard and give up. The aim is to avoid acute and uncomfortable withdrawal symptoms, which may lead to serious problems.

Keep a note of your daily intake. Use the same size glass to help keep track. Use a measuring cup if you have one. Be honest with yourself and other people.

Many people find it is the drinks in the middle of the day which are easier to cut back to start with, so they keep their early and late “doses” stable at the start of a period of reducing your drinking. If you are a spirit drinker, gradually reducing the alcohol and increasing the mixer can help but make sure to measure the amount of alcohol.

'the important thing is to reduce each day at a pace that is manageable for you.'

▶ **Step 3: Reducing and/or stopping drinking**

You will set your own pace, but eight days is a typical period for alcohol detox. By **Day 2** you might be at $\frac{3}{4}$ of your previous intake, for instance 6 cans rather than 8. By **Day 4** you might be at half your intake, for instance a $\frac{1}{2}$ bottle spirits rather than a bottle. If you are over 65 or your general health is poor, it may be sensible to reduce more gradually, over a longer time.

Withdrawals will often peak on **Day 2 or 3** so make sure to use your supports on these days. If you have an alcohol worker arrange to speak with them at least once on each of these three days.

In general, after about five days, your symptoms should lessen and you can continue your gradual reduction of alcohol and stop around **Day 8**. If, by **Day 5** things seem to be getting worse rather than better, contact your local community alcohol/ addiction service for advice or phone **111**.

If you develop more severe withdrawals (fits, hallucinations and confusion) seek urgent advice. Medical advice is available through your GP or from **111**. If someone is supporting you, make sure that they have your permission to seek urgent advice on your behalf, should you have any of these symptoms.

One thing that may take time to improve is your sleep. Sleep depends on routine and improves with practice. So be patient, stick to a sleep routine. Sleeping tablets are rarely helpful and best avoided.

► Step 4: Making other plans

Try to make sure you have a safe place to stay when you are planning to detox. During the COVID-19 crisis it will probably not be possible to have friends and family to stay or to visit them. Keep in touch by phone or online. Tell your trusted friends about your progress with alcohol, but talk about other things too.

It is very important that you have good nutrition during detox. Your vitamin and mineral intake are important, in particular a vitamin called Thiamine. You get this in bread, rice, fish and meat, as well as products such as Marmite and Bovril. If you have Thiamine tablets or a multivitamin tablet, take as directed on the bottle. If you have a fever, your Thiamine intake is even more important. If you are vomiting and unable to keep your food down, try nutritious liquids such as soup. If this doesn't work, seek advice from **111** in the first instance.

Keep up your fluids intake. Water or tea is better than coffee or soft drinks. Avoid "energy drinks."

Many local organisations are arranging online support and your local community alcohol/addiction service will be able to give you up to date information. It is a very good idea to make contact with a support organisation before you start cutting back as their help during and after the process can be very useful.



'Many local organisations are arranging online support and your local community alcohol/addiction service will be able to give you up to date information. It is a very good idea to make contact with a support organisation before you start cutting back as their help during and after the process can be very useful.'

▶ Mutual aid and support groups

In normal times, much of the help and support for recovery from alcohol-related problems takes place in communal settings. Options for online and phone support have developed in recent times, and such support is now being established across the country specifically in response to the COVID-19 emergency.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

For members of AA, the journey to recovery leans heavily on coming together with other self-defined alcoholics through working and living a 12-step programme, within a network of meetings, Fellowship, sponsorship and recovery friends. Individuals can attend one of the many existing online meetings. Details can be obtained by calling the 24-hour helpline – 0800 917 7650. A list of meetings registered with the General Service Office are available at www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/AA-Meetings/Find-a-Meeting/online

Many people with alcohol-related problems use other networks, including Narcotics Anonymous (NA) <https://ukna.org/covid19> and Cocaine Anonymous (CA) <https://cocaineanonymous.org.uk/> and the same principles apply with these as with AA.

Scottish Recovery Consortium

The Scottish Recovery Consortium (SRC) supports, represents and connects people in Recovery, Lived and Living Experience, Visible Recovery Communities and 'Recoverists' throughout Scotland. SRC has multiple communication channels including its Social Media profiles, Website and national networks of activists. Individuals can access the support of SRC through the following channels:

SRC Facebook: www.facebook.com/ScottishRecoveryConsortium/

SRC Twitter: <https://twitter.com/SRConsortium>

Recoverist Network Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/267095750579359/

Recoverist Network Twitter: <https://twitter.com/RecoveristN>

Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs (SFAD)

Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs supports anyone concerned about someone else's alcohol or drug use in Scotland. Help and advice is available to any families supporting a loved one using alcohol via their helpline and online services. These can be accessed in the following ways:

- Free and confidential helpline: **08080 10 10 11**
- Email: helpline@sfad.org.uk
- Visit: www.sfad.org.uk

SFAD has created a full range of resources, advice guides and live updates for families that can be accessed at: www.sfad.org.uk/support-services/support-for-families-about-coronavirus

SMART Recovery

SMART Recovery helps individuals recover from any addictive behaviour and lead meaningful & satisfying lives; using a science-based therapeutic programme of training: <https://smartrecovery.org.uk/>

We Are With You (formerly Addaction)

We Are With You provides information and support for anyone who is worried about their own or someone else's drinking or drug use and/or mental health:

www.wearewithyou.org.uk/

www.wearewithyou.org.uk/help-and-advice/coronavirus-covid-19/

► Sources of further guidance during COVID-19 pandemic

Advice in Non-Healthcare settings

www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/web-resources-container/covid-19-guidance-for-non-healthcare-settings/

Advice on Social Distancing

www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people/guidance-on-social-distancing-for-everyone-in-the-uk-and-protecting-older-people-and-vulnerable-adults

Advice on Mental Health

www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19/your-mental-wellbeing/coronavirus-covid-19-your-mental-wellbeing

www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/

www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/looking-after-your-mental-health-during-coronavirus-outbreak

Advice for Carers

www.carersuk.org/help-and-advice/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-covid-19



SHAAP

SCOTTISH HEALTH ACTION ON ALCOHOL PROBLEMS
www.shaap.org.uk

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) is a partnership of the Medical Royal Colleges in Scotland and the Faculty of Public Health and is based at the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (RCPE). SHAAP provides the authoritative medical and clinical voice on the need to reduce the impact of alcohol-related harm on the health and wellbeing of people in Scotland and the evidence-based approaches to achieve this.