

## Alcohol and stroke

Regularly drinking large amounts of alcohol greatly increases your risk of stroke. This factsheet explains how alcohol can increase your risk of stroke and why you should think about cutting down. It includes tips that can help you reduce the amount of alcohol you drink as well as details of where you can find information and support to help you.

### How can drinking alcohol increase my risk of stroke?

Research shows that drinking large amounts of alcohol can greatly increase your risk of having a stroke. This is because alcohol contributes to a number of medical conditions that are risk factors for stroke:

- **High blood pressure** is the most important risk factor for stroke, contributing to around 53% of all strokes in the UK. Drinking too much alcohol raises your blood pressure. Blood pressure is the measure of how strongly your blood presses against the walls of your arteries when it is pumped around your body. If this pressure is too high it puts a strain on your arteries and heart, which can lead to stroke.
- **Diabetes** doubles your risk of stroke. This is because it affects the way your body uses up sugar in your bloodstream. If you have high levels of sugar in your blood, it can damage your blood vessels, making them more likely to become blocked. If this happens in a blood vessel leading to your brain it can cause a stroke.
- Too much alcohol can change the way your body responds to insulin – a hormone that helps use up the sugar in your blood. This can lead to type 2 diabetes. Heavy drinking can also cause pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas). This condition reduces the amount of insulin you produce and can lead to diabetes as well.
- **Being overweight** increases your risk of having a stroke because it makes you more likely to develop type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure. Alcoholic drinks tend to be very high in calories, so regularly drinking lots of alcohol can make it more difficult to maintain a healthy weight.
- Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol can trigger **atrial fibrillation** – a type of irregular heartbeat. Atrial fibrillation increases your risk of stroke by five times, because it can cause blood clots to form in the heart. If these clots move up into the brain, it can lead to stroke.
- Too much alcohol can also **damage your liver** and stop it from making substances that help your blood to clot. This can increase your risk of having a stroke caused by bleeding in your brain.

### Can I drink alcohol if I've had a stroke?

As well as increasing your risk of having another stroke, there are other ways alcohol can have an impact:

- Drinking **alcohol when you're taking medication can have harmful effects.** Too much alcohol can be particularly harmful if you are on blood-thinning medication, such as warfarin. So if you've been prescribed medication following your stroke, make sure you ask your GP or pharmacist whether you can drink whilst taking it.
- If you've had a stroke, you may be **more vulnerable to the negative effects** that alcohol can have. If you're sleeping badly, have poor balance or speech problems, alcohol could make these worse.
- Alcohol can also **worsen mood swings and depression**, which are common after stroke. It can also affect your memory and thinking.
- Alcohol **makes you dehydrated**, so if you're suffering from headaches, drinking alcohol could make them worse.
- Alcoholic drinks are high in calories that have no nutritional value. So drinking alcohol can **make it difficult to maintain a healthy weight**. This is particularly important if you are less active than before your stroke, as you will need to reduce your calorie intake (especially these 'empty' calories) to avoid becoming overweight.

- If your **stroke was caused by bleeding in or around your brain** (a haemorrhagic stroke), drinking alcohol could put you at particular risk. **You will need to avoid alcohol for at least the first three weeks** after your stroke. You should then ask your doctor when it would be safe to start drinking alcohol again.

So, if you've had a stroke, it's important to **think about the amount you drink** and whether you need to cut down.

Your doctor will be able to advise you and tell you about services and support that can help you do it.

It may be possible for you to drink alcohol after a stroke, as long you stick within the recommended limits (see *How much alcohol is safe?* for details), but you need to get your doctor's advice on what is right for you before you do.

### How much alcohol is safe?

How much alcohol you can safely drink is **different for everyone**, as it depends on your age and other medical factors. So the best way to find out is to talk to your doctor.

However, doctors and the Department of Health suggest that **there are levels of drinking that are low-risk** and unlikely to cause harm to most people. There are two parts to the limits that they recommend:

- how much alcohol you drink
- how frequently you drink it.

### How much should I drink?

The amount of alcohol we drink is measured in units. One unit is 10ml of pure alcohol.

The amount of pure alcohol in a drink is shown as a percentage of **alcohol by volume (ABV)**.

You can find the ABV value of a drink on its label. A bottle of wine, for example, may have 12% ABV printed on its label. This means that 12% of the wine is pure alcohol.

To work out the number of units in a drink you need to know the size of the drink and its ABV value. You can then calculate how many units are in your drink as follows:

$$\text{ABV value} \times \text{size of drink (in ml)} \\ \div 1,000 = \text{number of units}$$

Most drinks now show the number of units they contain on the label. You can also get printed guides and apps for your phone that can help you work it out. However, the following may help you as a general guide:

- A small glass (125ml) of wine (ABV 12%) is **1.5 units**.
- A standard glass (175ml) of wine (ABV 12%) is **2.1 units**.
- A large glass (250ml) of wine (ABV 12%) is **3 units**.
- A pint of lower strength lager, beer or cider (ABV 3.6%) is **2 units**.
- A pint of higher strength lager, beer or cider (ABV 5.2%) is **3 units**.
- A single shot (25ml) of gin, rum or vodka (ABV 40%) is **1 unit**.

The Department of Health recommends that:

- women should not regularly drink more than **2-3 units a day**
- men should not regularly drink more than **3-4 units a day**.

However, doctors recommend that for drinking to really be low-risk: **women should not drink more than 14 units a week and men should not drink more than 21 units a week**.

### How often should I drink?

In addition to how much alcohol you drink, you also need to be aware of how frequently you drink. Because alcohol has a toxic effect on your body, doctors recommend that **you should have two or three alcohol-free days a week**, to help it recover.

Even if you're within the recommended limits, **you shouldn't 'binge drink'**. Binge drinking is when you drink a large amount of alcohol in a short space of time – more than 8 units in a day for men or more than 6 units in a day for women. This kind of drinking can be particularly dangerous, because it makes your blood pressure rise very quickly.

### What else should I think about?

As we get older, it takes our body longer to break down alcohol and we become more sensitive to its effects. This means that even the same amount of **alcohol is likely to have more of an effect on your health, the older you get**. Because of this, doctors think that safe levels of drinking for older people are less than those that are usually recommended.

They suggest that **older men should drink no more than 11 units a week and older women drink no more than 7 units a week.**

However, as very little research has been carried out into safe levels of drinking for older people there is no clear age when you should begin to reduce your drinking, so make sure you ask your doctor's advice.

Medication and other physical and mental health conditions can also increase the impact that alcohol has on your health.

Talk to your doctor about the level of drinking that is safe for you.

### Can drinking alcohol have benefits?

It's true that regularly drinking small amounts of alcohol may have some specific health benefits. Some research suggests that **regularly drinking 1 or 2 units of alcohol may reduce your risk of heart disease.**

It's thought that this is because small amounts of alcohol can help to reduce the risk of clots forming in your blood vessels. It may also affect the way that cholesterol is carried in the bloodstream, reducing the risk of fatty deposits building up in your blood vessels.

Although alcohol may offer some protection against heart attack and stroke, **there are more effective ways to protect your health.** These include eating a healthy diet, staying active, not smoking and having regular health checks as recommended by your doctor.

### How can I cut down?

First of all you need to work out how many units you're drinking. You can find out by keeping a 'drinks diary'. For a couple of weeks, at the end of each day, make a note of what you drank and count up the units. There are also websites and phone apps that can help you do this. See *Other useful contacts* for details.

If you find that you are regularly drinking more than the recommended amount, some of the following tips may help you cut down. Or you can **speak to your GP or practice nurse for help and support**, or contact some of the organisations listed at the end of this factsheet.

- Set yourself a daily alcohol limit and stick to it.
- Work out when you do most of your drinking and see if there are obvious times when you can cut back.
- Ask for support. Tell your family and friends that you're cutting down – they may be more supportive than you'd expect.
- Don't drink on an empty stomach. Have a good meal before you go out or limit your drinking to mealtimes only. Drinking with food slows down the rate that alcohol is absorbed into your bloodstream.
- Go for smaller sizes – so have a bottle of beer instead of a pint, or a small glass of wine instead of a large.
- Have regular alcohol-free days to avoid becoming dependent on drink.

- Try to alternate each drink with a glass of water or a soft drink. Not only will this help you cut down on the alcohol you're drinking, but it may also stop you from becoming dehydrated.
- If you're drinking in a group, avoid buying rounds, as this can encourage you to drink more alcohol, more quickly.
- Try alternatives to alcohol. Experiment with flavours – use slices of fruit to add extra zing or try non-alcoholic versions of your usual drinks. There are plenty of fruit drinks and alcohol-free wines and beers on the market.
- When you drink at home, try to pour smaller drinks than you would get in a pub or restaurant. You can buy measures, stoppers and vacuum seals to help you know exactly how much you're pouring.
- Keep a range of non-alcoholic drinks that you like at home, or try making smoothies or non-alcoholic cocktails. Or you could serve drinks that are lower in alcohol, like spritzers, cocktails or fruit punches.
- Many people like to drink because it helps them relax. So try to find other things that will help you do this. Find out if your local stroke group or leisure centre offers yoga, relaxation sessions or complementary therapies, which may help.
- Depression is common after a stroke, and is often a reason why people drink. If you're feeling low or depressed, then talk to someone about it. Your doctor will be able to tell you about help and support that is available. Drinking less should help to improve depression.

## How can I find out more?

### Talk to us

At the Stroke Association, our helpline team can give you information about stroke and tell you about services and support available in your local area. Call us on **0303 3033 100** (Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm) or email **info@stroke.org.uk**

### Get online

We have lots of information about stroke and how to prevent it on our website. Go to **stroke.org.uk**

### Read our publications

We also produce a range of other leaflets and factsheets about stroke and related issues. You can download these for free or order a printed copy to be posted to you via our website **stroke.org.uk** or by calling the helpline on **0303 3033 100**.

### Other useful contacts

If you're looking for more information the following organisations may also be able to help. All are UK wide unless otherwise stated. Please note that details of these organisations are for information only. We are not recommending or endorsing anyone by including them in this factsheet.

#### Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

**Website:** [www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)

**Helpline:** 0845 769 7555

Offers information and support for anyone concerned about their own drinking.

#### Al-Anon

**Website:** [www.al-anonuk.org.uk](http://www.al-anonuk.org.uk)

**Helpline:** 020 7403 0888

Provides information and support for anybody whose life is affected by someone else's drinking.

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### **Alcohol Concern (England and Wales)**

**Website:** [www.alcoholconcern.org.uk](http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk)

**Drinkline:** 0300 123 1110

An organisation that works to increase the range and quality of services available to people with alcohol-related problems. The website has publications to download and a directory of useful organisations.

### **Alcohol Focus Scotland**

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

**Drinkline Scotland:** 0800 7 314 314

An organisation that promotes responsible drinking and provides information and advice on alcohol and related issues.

### **DAN 24/7 (Wales Drug and Alcohol Helpline/ Cyffuriau ac Alcohol Cymru)**

**Website:** [www.dan247.org.uk](http://www.dan247.org.uk)

**Tel:** 0808 808 2234

A free, bilingual telephone helpline for anyone in Wales wanting further information and help relating to drugs and/or alcohol. Open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

### **Down Your Drink**

**Website:** [www.downyourdrink.org.uk](http://www.downyourdrink.org.uk)

This website has been developed by a team at University College London and is endorsed by Alcohol Concern. It allows users to work out whether they are drinking too much and if so, provides tips on what they can do to change this.

### **Drinkaware**

**Website:** [www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk)

An organisation that promotes responsible drinking. The website provides information on alcohol and how to drink sensibly. If you create an account you'll be able to find resources that can help you track your alcohol intake and drinking costs.

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### **About our information**

We are committed to producing clear, accurate and unbiased information for stroke survivors, their families and friends. To produce our publications we use information from professional bodies and other reliable sources including NICE, SIGN, Royal College of Physicians, medical journals and textbooks. For a list of all the sources used in this factsheet go to [stroke.org.uk](http://stroke.org.uk)

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