

How to cut down on your drinkingⁱ

If you are drinking too much, you can improve your life and health by cutting down. How do you know if you drink too much? Read these questions and answer 'yes' or 'no':

- Do you drink alone when you feel angry or sad?
- Does your drinking ever make you late for work?
- Does your drinking worry your family?
- Do you ever drink after telling yourself you won't?
- Do you ever forget what you did while you were drinking?
- Do you ever get headaches or have a hang-over after you have been drinking?

If you answered 'yes' to any of these questions, you may have a drinking problem. Check with your doctor to be sure. Your doctor will be able to tell you whether you should cut down or abstain. *If you are an alcoholic or have other medical problems, you should not just cut down on your drinking — you should stop drinking completely. Your doctor will advise you about what is right for you.*

If your doctor tells you to cut down on your drinking, these steps can help you. You might find that some strategies are more useful than others. Remember you can have the support of your family and/or friends to overcome your alcohol problem.

1. Write your reasons for changing

Why do you want to drink less? There are many reasons why you may want to cut down or stop drinking. First think carefully about your reasons for wanting to change. Then have a look at the list below and mark those that apply to you. *If you have other reasons, write them down and discuss them with your doctor and/or counsellor.*

- You will feel better
- You will have more energy
- You will lose excess weight
- You will sleep better
- You will save money
- You won't have any hangovers
- You will work better
- Your performance at work will improve
- Your health will improve
- Your family life will improve
- Your memory will improve
- There will be less conflict at home
- You won't be thinking about your next drink all the time
- You will prevent serious health problems

2. Set a drinking goal

Choose a limit for how much you will drink. You may choose to cut down or not to drink at all. Talk to your doctor about what is right for you.

Here are some suggestions about setting goals:

- ➔ If you are trying to **stop drinking altogether**, it is important to set a definite 'quit date'.
- ➔ If you are trying to **reduce your drinking**, it will help if you plan on which days you will drink alcohol and how many drinks you will have on each of these days. Make sure that you have at least two alcohol-free days in a week.
- ➔ It also helps to record the number of drinks that you have each day. Keeping a record will remind you to cut down and it will help you to keep track of whether you are following your goals.

Now, write your drinking goal on a piece of paper. Put it where you can see it, such as on your refrigerator or bathroom mirror. Your paper might look like this:

DRINKING GOAL

- I will start on this day
 - I will not drink more than drinks in one day
 - I will not drink more than drinks in one week
- OR
I will stop drinking alcohol.

3. Keep a 'diary' of your drinking

To help you reach your goal, keep a 'diary' of your drinking. For example, write down every time you have a drink in one week. Try to keep your diary for three or four weeks. This will show you how much you drink and when. You may be surprised. How different is your goal from the amount you drink now? Use the 'drinking diary' below to write down when you drink.

Week:			
	Number of drinks	Type of drinks	Place consumed
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

Now you know why you want to drink less and you have a goal. There are many ways you can help yourself cut down. Try the tips described below.

4. Tips for cutting down

Watch it at home

Keep a small amount or no alcohol at home. Don't keep temptations around.

Change the way you drink

- Quench your thirst with non-alcoholic drinks before having an alcoholic drink.
- Avoid salty snacks when you are drinking.
- Eat before drinking. It will make you feel more full and then you will drink less.
- Have one or more non-alcoholic drinks before each alcoholic drink.
- Try to take small sips of your drink, avoid gulping, drink slowly.
- Dilute your drinks, eg add soda to wine and mixers to spirits.
- Take a break of one hour between drinks.

Take a break from alcohol

Pick a day or two each week when you will not drink at all. Then, try to stop drinking for one week. Think about how you feel physically and emotionally on these days. When you succeed and feel better, you may find it easier to cut down for good.

Learn how to say NO

You do not have to drink when other people drink. You do not have to take a drink that is given to you. Practice ways to say no politely. For example, you can tell people you feel better when you drink less. Stay away from people who give you a hard time about not drinking.

Stay active

What would you like to do instead of drinking? Use the time and money spent on drinking to do something fun with your family or friends. Go out to eat, see a film, or play sports or a game.

Get support

Cutting down on your drinking may be difficult at times. Ask your family and friends for support to help you reach your goal. Talk to your doctor if you are having trouble cutting down. Get the help you need to reach your goal.

Watch out for temptations

Watch out for people, places or times that make you drink, even if you do not want to. Stay away from people who drink a lot or bars where you used to go. Plan ahead of time what you will do to avoid drinking when you are tempted. **Do not drink when you are angry or upset or have a bad day.** Section 5 below 'Dealing with difficult times' will help you with this.

5. Dealing with difficult times

Changing habits, such as drinking, can be difficult. There will be times when you may drink more than you have planned or there might be times when it is very difficult not to drink or limit your drinking.

Can you think of any difficult times when you had problems in controlling your drinking?

- ➔ Where were you?
- ➔ Who were you with?
- ➔ What were you doing?
- ➔ What were you feeling?

Now look at the list below. Mark the situations or feelings that tend to make you drink more. If you have other similar situations, write them below. Then discuss your list with your physician, counsellor, family member or a close friend.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> When I go to a party | <input type="checkbox"/> When I am feeling angry |
| <input type="checkbox"/> When I go to dinner | <input type="checkbox"/> When I am feeling stressed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> When I go to the pub | <input type="checkbox"/> When I want to relax |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Meeting people in social situations | <input type="checkbox"/> When I have had a difficult day |
| <input type="checkbox"/> When I am with friends who drink | <input type="checkbox"/> When I have had an argument |
| <input type="checkbox"/> When I am on my own | <input type="checkbox"/> When I am in a celebrating mood |
| <input type="checkbox"/> When I am feeling in a low mood | <input type="checkbox"/> When I invite friends over |
| <input type="checkbox"/> When I am feeling anxious | |

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Now you have the list of the most difficult times for you to resist drinking. If it is at all possible, avoiding difficult situations will be very useful. Your initial strategy should be to reduce the temptation to drink. In the long term, however, avoiding difficult situations may not be practical, so it is also important to work out strategies to cope with difficult situations. Take a look at some of the strategies below and mark those that would be useful to you.

- If you have the habit of going to pubs after work or have the habit of meeting your friends there;
try to organize a different social activity, eg going to see a film, or going to a gym or a park
- If you drink mainly at night;
try to keep yourself busy, go to places where you cannot drink, eg the cinema
- If you drink when you are with friends who drink heavily;
try to avoid contact with these friends
- If you drink when you are alone;
reduce the amount of time that you spend alone, eg join a club or a support group or increase time doing activities with family members
- If you drink when you are bored;
try to plan enjoyable activities, eg shows, films, exercise, hobbies, etc.

- If you drink when you are stressed;
learn relaxation techniques or engage in relaxing activities, eg gardening
- If you drink when you feel depressed or if you think that drinking calms your anxiety;
you must consult your doctor about it

Make a list of your most difficult times and write below a few strategies to help you in each of these situations

Difficult times

eg Friday night after work

.....

Strategies

eg invite a non-drinking friend to go and see a film

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6. Important things to remember

- ➔ Keep your drinking at a level that is within the safe limits.
- ➔ Remember to have two alcohol-free days a week.
- ➔ Be realistic; you may want to plan your drinks for social occasions.
- ➔ Remember not to drink more than your limit.

7. A word about set backs

Most people do not cut down or give up drinking all at once. There may be times when you will find it difficult to stick to your goals. You might find that you had a few more drinks than you had planned to drink.

Do not get discouraged — do not think of yourself as a failure. Learn from each occasion. Keep on trying.

Remember:

- ➔ Do not give in because you have had a bad experience.
- ➔ Take one day at a time and gradually it will get easier.
- ➔ You need your family and friends to support you.
- ➔ Every time you stop yourself from doing something as a habit, you are one step closer to breaking that habit.
- ➔ The craving for alcohol will go if you mentally occupy yourself with something else.
- ➔ You should consult your physician and/or counsellor concerning your difficulties.
- ➔ Do not give up.

If you cannot achieve your goals, it is important that you ask yourself 'why not?' or 'what went wrong?' This might help you plan different strategies in the future. Use the diary on

the next page to help you identify factors that are connected to your desire to drink and that need to be dealt with in order to help you to reach your goals.

8. About detoxification

If you are physically dependent on alcohol, the first part of treatment is called detoxification. *Detoxification refers to a period of time when you stop taking alcohol.* As a result, your body has to re-adjust to a normal state without alcohol, and you are likely to experience symptoms of alcohol withdrawal. The most common symptoms include nausea, shaking, sweating, irregular heartbeat, anxiety and fatigue. These symptoms gradually improve over three to five days. People who have been drinking very heavily for a long time may experience more serious symptoms such as fits, confusion about the day, time or location. They may experience hallucinations (ie seeing or hearing things that do not exist). For most people who are moderately dependent on alcohol, it is safe to withdraw from alcohol as an outpatient or at home, under the supervision of a doctor. Others need to be in a hospital setting. Discuss which is best for you with your doctor. Medication can help to reduce unpleasant symptoms of withdrawal during the withdrawal phase, although if you experience only mild withdrawal symptoms, you may need only support, lots of fluids and nutrition. There is ***no medication*** that will ***cure*** an alcohol problem.

When withdrawal is finished, you will need to use the non-drug strategies described in this leaflet. Self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous are also helpful for many people.

Understanding your drinking: diary

This diary will help you identify factors connected to your desire to drink that need to be dealt with in order to help you to reach your goals. If you have slipped back, it will help you answer the question 'why?' and 'what went wrong?' That might help you plan different strategies in the future.

Day, date, times	Where, with, when, what	Thoughts before drinking/drug taking	What did you do?	Behaviours, feelings, consequences	What did you drink/take?	No. of standard drinks or drugs

ⁱ Adapted, with permission, from World Health Organization. *Mental Disorders in Primary Care: a WHO Education Package*, 1998; and Andrews G, Jenkins R, eds. *Management of Mental Disorders (UK Edition)*. Sydney: World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, 1999. Distributed for the publishers in the UK by IN 2 Mail Ltd, fax: +44 (0)1252 322315; PO Box 55, Aldershot, Hampshire GU12 4FP.