

ENJOYING A DRINK AND STAYING SAFE AS WE GET OLDER

Hints and tips
for groups



Why we have written these hints and tips

Most older people have enjoyed a drink throughout their adult lives and know how to keep well. But as we get older it sometimes becomes harder to find the best balance.

- Our bodies respond differently to alcohol as we get older.
- We often take more medication and pills and alcohol don't always mix well.
- We may have more problems with our balance or poorer eyesight.

These tips are to give groups led by older people and other community groups ideas about what they can do as a group to help each other and to drink less alcohol. Some of the ideas will also work for groups of friends who meet up, as well as for more organised groups such as daytime activity groups and participation groups.

“We just put some leaflets out. There were some really simple ideas about how to drink less.”

The suggestions come from the experience of other older people and older people’s groups across Scotland and from the good practice advice that doctors and other experts give. It’s about enjoying alcohol and keeping safe as we get older.

We also have Hints and Tips for older people, their families and friends who might be thinking about how people can drink a bit less and how to look after each other.

Raising Awareness about drinking alcohol as we get older

One first step is to begin to raise awareness about drinking alcohol as we get older. Many of us have never thought about it.

- Get some leaflets and make them available at your group. There are sources of further information at the end of these Tips.
- Ask someone to talk to the group. Lots of groups have a programme of talks.

You could invite someone along to talk to you all about alcohol and how it affects us differently as we get older. This way they can lead the discussion and they will have the latest information to share. A good starting point is your local Health Centre or a local alcohol project. They will be able to direct you to someone.

- Talk about it among yourselves. The topic can come up as part of a conversation about what people are doing over the weekend. Or there could be an item in the news or a storyline in a television programme that starts a discussion.
- Bring up how we use alcohol as part of talking about difficult situations people face, such as feeling lonely or coping with change.

- Or bring it up in the context of being safe at home. We get and test smoke detectors, we check for trip hazards in case we fall, we watch for other things that increase risks for us – which includes using alcohol in ways that are not safe.
- Have more than one conversation. Some people will feel uncomfortable talking about this. If there is a conversation, and then another one on a month or so, and again, it becomes easier for people to get used to talking about it.

“There was a lot on the news about minimum prices for alcohol and that got us talking.”

“We invited someone to talk to us about alcohol and getting older. They told us

about units and safe limits. She had good practical advice on how to still enjoy a drink and be ok.”

“It was good to talk about alcohol and our drinking – it kind of gave us permission to talk to each other and share experiences.”

“Some of the women in our group were embarrassed talking about alcohol. I think it’s because when we were young it was ok for men to go to the pub, but women were supposed to just have a sherry at New Year. I hope it helped them to know that it’s ok to have a drink and it’s good to be open about it.”

Changing some activities as a group

Doing some things differently as a group and reducing the opportunities for drinking alcohol can help many people to drink a bit less, or drink in ways that are safer.

“Once a week we used to meet in the local pub for lunch and we would have a few beers or glasses of wine. But when we talked about it we said that although we enjoyed the lunch, the beers and the chat, it did mean that we tended to do less in the afternoon after having a few drinks at lunch time. So we decided to see if we could change things just a little bit. We decided we would meet at the local café for lunch every other week, as that’s nice too.”

“We now have a session on Sunday afternoons, as people said that was

the time they found difficult and some folk were having a few too many beers on their own. We do different activities, such as carpet bowls, indoor golf and table tennis. We have a league table and have got quite competitive and it's got us up and moving around more. I think we laugh more now too!"

Events and celebrations

Serving wine and beer at celebrations and events is a normal part of life and many people choose to celebrate with alcohol. But this may not be good for everyone.

These are ways other groups have approached it.

- Serving alcohol on major occasions such as Christmas, but also increasing the range of soft drinks and alternatives.
- Having some tables that have no alcohol on them, so some of the members can enjoy the meal without the temptation.
- Having someone as a buddy to watch out for a friend who finds alcohol a challenge or tends to forget how much they've had.
- Having other types of celebrations.

"Sometimes it feels that every event and occasion is celebrated with alcohol and we get stuck thinking this is the only way to enjoy ourselves or mark an occasion. This time, when it was my birthday I asked to go for afternoon tea instead of a meal with wine."

“Bill tends to be a bit forgetful these days, and when he’s enjoying himself he can drink more than he means to. A couple of us agreed with him that we’ll keep an eye on him at the Christmas party. That way he’s still part of the company, he’s safe and his wife isn’t worrying herself.”

Safe food and drink

There are lots of ways a group can help members be safer with alcohol.

- One is finding alternatives to alcohol, so people drink less.
- Another is to encourage people to eat more – have a drink with a meal rather than on its own, or have better nibbles to go with a drink.

Mocktails

Over the last few years there has been a rise in the popularity of mocktails, a non-alcoholic alternative to cocktails. There are many different recipes to suit different tastes, occasions and seasons. Some groups have enjoyed experimenting with different recipes.

The internet is a good place to start looking and a useful website with recipes can be found at <https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/make-a-change/how-to-cut-down/cutting-down-at-home/mocktails-made-easy/>

“We starting making mocktails at the Older People’s Forum and now serve them quite often. You can get a bit bored of tea and biscuits.”

“We had a fun time when we had a go at making mocktails. The best and tastiest ones only have a few things in them like a bit of fruit, lemonade or ginger ale and lots of ice. We also experimented with fizzy water because some people are diabetic or are trying to have less sugar and it works. You can make large quantities quite easily and cheaply.”

Good food sessions

Encouraging people to eat well is a good idea anyway, and is another way to help people be safer when they are drinking.

- Having a drink is safer when we are eating as it slows the rate at which we absorb the alcohol.

- If someone is drinking too much or too often they may be skipping on meals, which adds to their problems.
- Someone who is drinking too often or too much may well not be looking after themselves in other ways too.

“We had cooking classes in the group – cooking for one, learning how to freeze portions, easy healthy nibbles for the days you can’t be bothered cooking. That sort of thing. We ranged from people who had never needed to cook for themselves to folk who used to cook for a family of six every day. It was a good laugh.”

“If you’re eating well and looking after yourself, you don’t bother as much about having a drink.”

“We’ve been swapping tips on how to make food taste like something. Your sense of taste changes as you get older, and some medications make food taste funny.”

Dry January

Another thing you could do as a group is sign up for Dry January. This where you decide not to drink any alcohol for a month. Many people choose January but it could be a different month. As a group you can support and encourage each other. That way you don’t feel you are doing something on your own.

Dry January is a campaign supported by the Westminster and Scottish Governments, and charities such as Cancer Research UK.

“We like to be different so we have a Dry October.”

“A few of us from the walking group signed up for Dry January. The first week was hard because I had to keep remembering not to have a drink. But then I just got used to it.”

If you are worried about someone

It can feel very difficult to know what to do if you are worried someone is drinking too much. Most of us don’t like to interfere and are not really sure what to do. But there are a few things which could help.

- Have a chat with them - show concern not disapproval. Don’t start with “I think you have a problem”. Use positive language and open questions such as: “I wonder if your health might

improve if you drank a bit less." "I have noticed this....what do you think?"

- Talk to a family member or friend who is close to the person.
- Talk to someone at the Health Centre. They will be able to give you general advice without needing to discuss anyone's personal details.
- Ask a worker who knows the person to help raise the issue with them.



"We were a bit worried about one of our friends and it was difficult to know what to do. But after having a speaker talk to us about alcohol and older people we all just started talking. We came up with our own plan for all of us being more active and ways to drink less."

"I mentioned it to Mary, who is the co-ordinator at the Centre. She's good at finding a way to have a quiet word with anyone who is struggling a bit more than usual, and getting us to the right place for advice."

"The suggestions in these tips for people help. You could give a copy to your relative or pal and say 'I care about what happens to you'."

Finally

The people from older people's groups and community groups who helped us develop these Hints found that they still enjoyed having a drink, and they enjoyed it more when they knew they were safe.

"With our social group now we just have wine for our Christmas celebration and other big things like a special birthday or anniversary but not every week. I think we all feel better for it and enjoy more."

"I have one pint with the lads in the pub on a Saturday. I've been going there for years. It's the company I enjoy, so I'm happy to move onto the soft stuff."

"We are now talking about drinking alcohol and how it affects us differently as we get older and the medications we also take. I'm not sure any of us would have thought about it before."

Thank you to everyone who contributed to these hints and tips:

- Staff in NHS teams and Alcohol and Drug Partnerships, who also checked that we are giving good advice
- Older people and their families and friends
- People in community groups and care services in touch with older people.

Useful websites

Drink Smarter is a website funded by the Scottish Government to encourage us all to drink alcohol sensibly. <http://www.drinksmaarter.org/>

NHS gives advice on how to live well and drink less alcohol. <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/alcohol/Pages/Tipsoncuttingdown.aspx>

Age UK website for older people has ideas on how to drink less alcohol. <http://www.ageuk.org.uk/scotland/health-wellbeing/keeping-healthy/alcohol/>

Drink Aware is a charitable organisation which aims to get people to think differently about alcohol. <https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/make-a-change>

There are lots of good services in each local area to help people keep well. There is a list at: www.otbds.org/olderpeoplealcohol

Notes and local contacts

For more information

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