

# ENJOYING A DRINK AND STAYING SAFE AS WE GET OLDER

Hints and tips for people and their families and friends 

## 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.

You may be worried about someone or about yourself and don't know what to do. These Hints are here to help you.

We also have Hints for groups led by older people on ways they can enjoy alcohol and keep each other safe.

How and when we drink has also changed over the years. It used to be the case that you only drank alcohol in pubs and on special occasions. The drinks were expensive and pubs and off licences were only open at set times of the day. Nowadays alcohol is cheaper to buy and more readily available. We tend to drink more at home, on more occasions, and buy alcohol in supermarkets along with our other shopping.

**“When you drink at home, you just pour it into a glass and don't necessarily think about how much you are drinking.”**

**“When you go round to someone's house you used to be offered a cup of tea, but now there seems to be more occasions when I'm offered wine instead.”**

**“Our wine glasses are so much bigger than they used to be – but I still think I've only had one glass!”**

For many of us the new reduced drink driving laws mean that we drink less alcohol when we are out and about, especially if we rely on driving to get around. But this means there is a risk that we drink more at home.

**“I don’t drink at all if I’m driving now. I wait until I get home and then have a glass of wine.”**

**“I enjoy drinking most days - it’s part of my life. But I do drink smaller and smaller amounts now that I’m older.”**

These tips are for older people on how to drink less alcohol and how to help each other. They come from the experience of other older people 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.

Some people have lived with alcohol problems for many years. Although these hints are not aimed at people in this situation, we hope that the sources of further information are helpful.

## **Points to watch for**

It may not be obvious when someone is drinking more than is good for them. Here are some signs that you may notice in yourself or someone you care about. It gives you the prompt to talk about it and get some advice.

Remember, this is the start of a conversation. There can be other reasons for some of these signs, such as other health problems. But you would want that checked out too.

- Be aware of what else is going on in someone’s life. There are changes that can lead to increased use of alcohol for many people, such as bereavement or family problems.
- There are times when we are drinking the same amount as

before but now have problems, such as when we are unwell or are taking medication.

These are situations where you should be concerned about someone.

- Generally not feeling great, feeling sluggish and less able to cope after having a drink.
- Looking a bit unkempt – not so clean and tidy, skipping having a wash or a shave more often than before, or a smell of alcohol on someone's breath or clothes.
- Getting up later in the mornings, or missing or forgetting appointments.
- Getting short of money or struggling to pay bills – if someone is spending on alcohol then they may be getting behind in paying other bills.

- Behaviour changes – people can get quite “narky” or grumpy, or their temperament changes when they can't have a drink.
- Bruising to the body – alcohol thins the blood and also put us more off balance, so we fall and bump into things more easily.

**“It doesn't usually happen overnight. It sort of creeps up on you. It helps when a friend notices and asks if you are ok.”**

## **Some hints on how to drink less in your home**

This is just about making some small changes that over time will make a big difference.

- Try using smaller wine glasses or an alcohol measure so you know how much you have had to drink.
  - Don't use alcohol to quench your thirst - drink water or a soft drink first. If you are not thirsty you will probably drink less.
  - It's good to have some days - two or three - in the week when you don't have any alcohol at all.
  - Have alcohol with food and just drink while you are eating. Wine and beer goes well with food. If you drink and eat at the same time, you are likely to drink less than if you sit drinking while watching the TV.
  - Have a jug of water on the table as well as wine at meals and try to alternate between water or a soft drink and alcohol. That way you will drink a lot less without really noticing.
- Try replacing the alcohol in your fridge with soft drinks or making non-alcoholic mocktails.
  - Left overs - wine doesn't go off over night. Get a good bottle stopper and it will last a lot longer. Left over wine and beer can be frozen too and used in cooking, adding flavour to casseroles and risottos.
  - Avoid bulk buying alcohol or keeping too many drinks in your home. If it's not in the cupboard you are less likely to drink it. Stock up on alternatives instead.

You can also make it easier for other people to drink less when they come to your house.



- Don't have wine, or not as much, when you suspect someone is taking a lot of medication.
- Make the coffee earlier, or offer that instead of a drink.

**"I have started drinking a glass of water in between glasses of wine. I found that this helps me drink a bit less."**

**"We try to only buy the drinks we are going to have in the week and once we have run out that is it until the next shop. It definitely means we have some alcohol free days every week."**

**"Have a drink as something special to enjoy, once in a while. Sip it slowly and appreciate it."**

## **Hints on how to drink less outside your home**

- Drink water or soft drinks before you go out so you are not thirsty.
- Try not to drink in rounds because this can make you drink a lot faster than you'd like or realise. Perhaps buy your own drinks or try buying drinks with a smaller group of friends.
- Spread out your drinks throughout the night and space out with soft drinks. Try having a soft drink or two with each alcoholic drink.
- Going for smaller measures means drinking less alcohol. So you could go for bottled beer or halves instead of sticking to pints. Or have a smaller glass of wine and only buy single measures of spirits.

- Try a more diluted alcoholic drink such as a spritzer or shandy. Another option is to swap strong beers and wines for ones with less alcohol.
- Watch out for cocktails. They can contain more alcohol than you might think.

You may also need to be ready to say 'no thanks' to people. It can help if you practise it so you are ready so you feel confident and less likely to be bothered about any questions.

**"I don't like diluted drinks, so a shandy is not for me. I just try to drink less, by drinking slowly and really enjoying it."**

**"I practised saying 'I'll have something else instead' so I was ready when I was asked about having a drink."**

**"I meet my friends for a few drinks on a Thursday night. We have been doing this for years. I have started to have a large glass of water before I leave the house so I'm not thirsty and drinking halves instead of pints. When I was younger I wouldn't have dreamed of doing this but now I don't care."**

## **Dry January**

Another thing you could do is sign up for Dry January. This is where you decide not to drink any alcohol for a month. Many people choose January but it could be a different month. Dry January is a campaign supported by the Westminster and Scottish Governments, and charities such as Cancer Research UK. Many employers support and encourage the campaign locally too.

For many people Dry January is good way to start the year - offering a chance to drink less, and think about their relationship with alcohol. It can also be a good way for people to start thinking and talking about alcohol.

It can help if you sign up with a friend or two so you can support and encourage each other. That way you don't feel you are doing something on your own.

There are also internet based forums that you could join to get support and encouragement. Gransnet is forum for older people to chat and talk to each other.

<http://www.gransnet.com/forums>

There is also a facebook page for Dry January too. <https://www.facebook.com/DryJanuary>

"I was in two minds about doing Dry January, but I like a challenge and it was. It helped me realise two things. That I often drink without thinking just because it is what I usually do at this time and with this group of people. I also realised that I really like the taste of alcohol but don't need it every day."

"I lost some weight, I think because I ate less nibbles and I slept a lot better too. That was a surprise because I thought I slept well anyway."

"I did it with my son and grand-children. The young ones are at the age when you want to be setting good habits."

## Steps you can take to look after yourself

- Cut down the amount of alcohol you are drinking.
- Think about the times of day or situations when you tend to drink more. Find something else to do at that time, or plan to be with other people if you drink on your own.
- Phone a friend, or get someone to phone you, when you know a chat and reassurance would be useful. You don't have to mention the alcohol part if you don't want to. "Can you ring me in the early evening? I tend to feel a bit down then."
- Try to avoid people who encourage you to drink more than you like. Practice what you can say to refuse a drink, even if you can't stop them drinking more.
- Talk to your doctor or the pharmacist about whether it is safe to take alcohol with any medication you are on.
- Look at your house and how safe it is if you do have a stumble. It's a good idea to do that in any case.

## If you are worried about someone

It can be 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.
- Talk to your doctor or nurse.

“I keep an eye on my friend and I suggest we do things that are active and not about sitting drinking.”

“I was worried about my friend. I used the internet to find out more. It’s a great place to find information about anything and no one needs to know you are looking.”

“The advice from our health team was to aim for half the ‘safe alcohol’ levels. That made it easier to help my friend to cut down.”

“Take it easy. Still have a dram but savour it, don’t rush it.”

## Finally

The people 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.

“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.”

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.drinksmafter.org/>

**NHS Livewell** 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/>

**Down your drink** has tools and resources to reduce our drinking, stay motivated and keep on track. <http://www.downyourdrink.org.uk/>

**Drinkaware** is a charitable organisation which aims to get people to think differently about alcohol. It has some useful advice on how what to do if you are worried about someone. <https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/make-a-change>

<https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/check-the-facts/effects-on-relationships/concerned-about-someones-drinking>

<https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/understand-your-drinking/is-your-drinking-a-problem/am-i-alcohol-dependent/>

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

# Notes and local contacts

## For more information

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