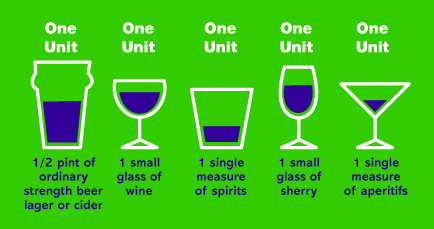


**HEALTH MATTERS**

***ALCOHOL AWARENESS***

**What are the Recommended Safe Limits of Alcohol?**

* **Men** should drink no more than 21 units of alcohol each week, no more than four units in any one day and have at least two alcohol-free days a week.
* **Women** should drink no more than 14 units of alcohol each week, no more than three units in any one day and have at least two alcohol-free days a week.  Pregnant women or women trying to conceive should not drink alcohol at all. If they do choose to drink, to minimise the risk to the baby, they should not drink more than 1 or 2 units of alcohol once or twice a week, and should aim not to become drunk.

**Why do we have Recommendations?**

Your liver processes alcohol, and it can only cope with so much at a time. Drinking more alcohol than the liver can cope with can damage liver cells and produce toxic by-product chemicals.  The more you drink, and especially above the recommended limits, the greater the risk of developing serious problems.  Remember, binge drinking can be harmful even though the weekly total may not seem too high.

**What is a Unit of Alcohol?**

* One unit of alcohol is about equal to:
  + *Half a pint of ordinary strength beer, lager, or cider (3-4% alcohol by volume)*
  + *A small pub measure (25 ml) of spirits (40% alcohol by volume)*
  + *A standard pub measure (50 ml) of fortified wine such as sherry or port (20% alcohol by volume).*
* There are one and a half units of alcohol in:
  + *A small glass (125 ml) of ordinary strength wine (12% alcohol by volume); or*
  + *A standard pub measure (35 ml) of spirits (40% alcohol by volume).*

**Isn't Alcohol Good for You?**

For men aged over 40 and for women past the menopause, it is thought that drinking a small amount of alcohol helps to protect against heart disease and stroke. The exact amount is not clear but it is a small amount. So, do not exceed the recommended intake of alcohol described above in a mistaken belief that it may be good for the heart.

**What are the Actual Health Risks?**

About one in three men and about one in seven women drink more than the safe levels.  Many people who drink heavily are not addicted to alcohol and are not alcoholics. To stop or reduce drinking alcohol would not be a problem for them, if there was the will to do so.  However, for various reasons, many people have got into the habit of drinking regularly and heavily - but doing this is a serious health risk.  You should regularly talk to your children about the risks of alcohol in a way that is appropriate to their age.  If you feel your child is having a problem with alcohol, talk to your GP, as there are services now available for young people.

If you drink heavily you have an increased risk of developing liver problems, some cancers, stomach disorders and inflammation of the pancreas.  You are also prone to mental health problems.  Sexual difficulties and muscle and heart disease can also occur.  Other health risks include high blood pressure, damage to nervous tissues, obesity and addiction.  In pregnancy, the baby is also at risk of a low birth weight, learning, behavioral and thinking (cognitive) problems, defects of the heart and other organs as well as abnormal facial features.  People who drink heavily are also at increased risk of accidents, especially from fire and road traffic accidents.

Many families have become severely affected by one member becoming a problem drinker, often causing emotional and financial difficulties in such families.

**What is Alcohol Dependence?**

If you are alcohol dependent you have a strong desire for alcohol and have great difficulty in controlling your drinking.  Your body is used to lots of alcohol, so you may develop withdrawal symptoms 3-8 hours after your last drink as the effect of the alcohol wears off.  So, even if you want to stop drinking, it is often difficult because of withdrawal symptoms, which include feeling sick, shaking, sweating, craving for alcohols and feeling unwell.

As a result, some people drink regularly to prevent withdrawal symptoms, and the severity of this dependence can vary.  It can develop gradually and become more severe. You may be developing alcohol dependence if you find that you need a drink every day or if you regularly drink alone.  Other signs include needing a drink to stop shaking, or drinking early in the morning to avoid withdrawal symptoms.  You may also find yourself regularly craving alcohol or making sure that your leisure activities include the opportunity to drink. In addition you may find yourself neglecting other interests because of your drinking.

*If you think that you may be dependent on alcohol and would like to stop or cut down, please seek medical advice first.  If you suddenly stop drinking it can be dangerous, but there is help available to keep you safe.*

**What Can I Do to Help Myself if I Think I have a Problem?**

Once they know the facts, many people can quite easily revert back to sensible drinking.  If you are trying to cut down, the following tips may help:

* *Consider drinking low-alcohol beers, and do not drink strong beers or lagers.*
* *Try pacing your rate of drinking. Perhaps alternate soft drinks with alcoholic drinks.*
* *If you eat when you drink, you may drink less.*
* *Try to resist any pressure from people who may encourage you to drink more than you really want to.*
* *It may be worth reviewing your entire social routine. For example, consider:*
  + *Cutting back on types of social activity which involve drinking.*
  + *Trying different social activities where drinking is not involved.*
  + *Reducing the number of days in the week where you go out to drink.*
  + *Going out to the pub or the bar later in the evening.*

**Do you Need Help?**

**Help and treatment are available if you find that you cannot cut down your drinking to safe limits by yourself. Contact the Health Promotion or Mental Health Teams for advice and support, at:**

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**Marian Kanes**, **Health Promotion Trainer**

**SHG**

**4 January 2016**