

How to use alcohol wisely

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Alcohol is a source of pleasure and an intoxicant. Alcohol relaxes and makes you more outgoing, and these effects can be achieved by having just one drink, unless you have increased your alcohol tolerance with excessive practicing.

It is good to know how much alcohol a given beverage contains. That way, you won't accidentally drink too much. One serving of alcohol (one drink) refers to an amount of beverage that contains 12 grams of alcohol. A single serving of alcohol consists of e.g. one glass (12 cl) of wine, one small bottle of medium strength beer or cider, one small glass (8 cl) of fortified wine, or one shot (4 cl) of spirits.

Drinking alcohol results in intoxication. The more and faster you drink, the stronger the state of intoxication.

Alcohol affects people in different ways. Some can tolerate alcohol better than others. What is too much for each of us depends on several factors, e.g. sex, body build, weight and age. Usually women become intoxicated more easily than men.

If you drink a lot and often, your body gets used to alcohol. This tolerance can easily lead to high-scale consumption of alcohol. Continuous high-scale consumption can lead to addiction, that is, alcoholism.

What is moderation?

The ideas Finns have about moderation are very varied. For some, moderation means a bottle of spirits on a Friday night (a half a litre bottle of spirits has 13 servings of alcohol), for others, two or three beers once a week.

Moderation can also be assessed objectively. Health problems caused by alcohol increase as total consumption increases. The more you drink on a single occasion, the higher the risk of accidents.

In order to use alcohol moderately, you must limit both how much you drink on a single occasion and your overall consumption.

Anyone may need to assess their own drinking habits at some point.

The guidelines for risky alcohol use for healthy adults:

- Mild risk level for men is 0-2 drinks and for women 0-1 drinks per day.
- Moderate risk level for men is 14 drinks, and for women 7 drinks and over per week
- High risk level for men is 23-24 drinks, and for women 12-16 drinks per week

These guidelines are estimates as defining such limits is problematic for several reasons. For example, many illnesses are aggravated in direct proportion to alcohol consumption without a "threshold value". Also note that the young, the elderly and the infirm can experience harmful effects even when they consume alcohol in moderation as per these guidelines. During pregnancy, even small amounts of alcohol increase the risks for the foetus.

Being able to drink alcohol in moderation requires knowledge of how much alcohol each beverage contains. In order to control your drinking, it's a good idea to learn how to assess your consumption in standard servings. Every now and then you should assess how much you drink on a weekly level to make sure you're not jeopardising your health.

If alcohol controls your thoughts and actions, you have two choices: to stop drinking altogether or to cut down.

You control how intoxicated you become

You will become intoxicated more slowly

- if you drink beverages with low alcohol content
- if you drink diluted alcoholic drinks

- if you drink slowly
- if you eat before drinking alcohol

The state of intoxication weakens your ability to function. That's why you should stay focused on what you plan to do after you've been drinking. It's good to remember that even a small amount of alcohol can cause an accident.

You should also remember that your blood alcohol content may still be elevated in the morning, if you had a late night.

Intoxication usually leads to a hangover. It may require treatment, if you are prone to arrhythmia and low blood sugar or if you have epilepsy. For someone suffering from a hangover, strenuous exercise or even going to the sauna may be dangerous. The use of alcohol has negative effects on the following day even if you don't get a hangover. Your sleep is disturbed, you're not as alert, you make more mistakes, and your work suffers.

To sum up

- Learn what one serving of alcohol means. For example, if you are in the habit of drinking half a bottle of wine at a time, that's 3 servings, as one bottle is 6 servings.
- Regulate your drinking so that you do not exceed the safe-use guidelines on a single occasion or on the weekly level.
- Women should not have more than 16 and men not more than 24 drinks per week. Women should not drink more than 5 drinks on a single occasion, men no more than 7.
- Remember that these guidelines are for reference only and that they may vary greatly from individual to individual.

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Answering the 10 questions will give you information on several aspects related to your drinking and the possible risks and harms, or, alternatively, that there are no problems in sight in the near future.

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