



# Ask About Alcohol

## Module 1: Identification and starting the conversation

Excessive drinking has a significant impact on the NHS, society, drinkers and their families.

Self-reported alcohol consumption accounts for only 40 to 60% of alcohol sales, suggesting that most people underestimate or don't know how much they are drinking<sup>1</sup>.

Latest estimates suggest that between 6-8% of the UK adult population are alcohol dependent<sup>2,3</sup>.

In Primary Care, amongst the patients that you see every day there are likely to be some 'hidden drinkers', most likely mild-moderately dependent patients, perhaps presenting with other conditions such as depression<sup>4</sup>, diabetes<sup>5</sup> or hypertension<sup>6</sup>.

In men, harmful drinking increases the risk of hypertension four fold. In women, harmful drinking doubles the risk. It is also estimated that about 42% of men and 16% of women with depression drink above the recommended levels.<sup>7</sup>

These people need your help and there are ways you can make a positive difference.

### Increased risks of ill health to harmful drinkers

Condition	Men (increased risk)	Women (increased risk)
Hypertension (high blood pressure)	Four times	Double
Stroke	Double	Four times
Coronary heart disease	1.7 times	1.3 times
Pancreatitis	Triple	Double

Table adapted from The British Liver Trust Report - Reducing alcohol harm: recovery and informed choice for those with alcohol related health problems. 2011.<sup>8</sup>

### Recommended drinking limits<sup>9</sup>

**In the UK, 1 unit is measured as 10ml or 8g of pure alcohol**

This equals:

One pub measure (25ml) of whisky, alcohol by volume: (ABV 40%)

Half a pint of ordinary strength beer, lager or cider (3-4% ABV)

Half a standard (175ml) glass of red wine (ABV 12%)

**WOMEN**

2-3 units or 16-24g alcohol per day

**MEN**

3-4 units or 24-32g alcohol per day

**Men should:**

- drink no more than 21 units of alcohol per week
- drink no more than four units in any one day
- have at least two alcohol-free days a week

**Women should:**

- drink no more than 14 units of alcohol per week
- drink no more than three units in any one day
- have at least two alcohol-free days a week

[www.alcoholreduction.co.uk/ask](http://www.alcoholreduction.co.uk/ask)  
A video series for primary care

Provided by Lundbeck Ltd  
in association with the  
Ask About Alcohol resource



## ***Opportunistic and sympathetic questioning is the foundation of detection***

Identifying patients who are drinking too much alcohol often means asking people opportunistically about their drinking when they visit the surgery for another reason.

Linking alcohol to the condition they are presenting with will put the conversation into context. Asking wider questions about their lifestyle can also feel less confrontational. It's also important to be factual and inform the patient why you're asking these questions.

### **Some conversation starters to help you open the discussion about alcohol...**

- Some people feeling low say having a drink gives them a lift. What about you?
- Some people like to have a drink to relax at night – do you drink at all in the evenings?
- Lots of things can affect your mood – stress at work or at home, caffeine or alcohol for example. Do you feel stressed at the moment?
- Some people take a drink to help get to sleep. What about you?
- Did you know that research has shown that in patients with high blood pressure, reducing excessive alcohol consumption can help lower the blood pressure?
- Some people use alcohol to reduce anxiety, but the effects are often short lived and frequently they feel a worsening of their anxiety the following day. Have you noticed anything like that?

NB: The RCGP have accredited video modules 1 to 3 as an educational resource.

[www.alcoholreduction.co.uk/ask](http://www.alcoholreduction.co.uk/ask)  
A video series for primary care

Provided by Lundbeck Ltd  
in association with the  
Ask About Alcohol resource



1. University College London, Alcohol consumption higher than reported in England. Press release Feb 2013 available here: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/news-articles/1302/27022013-Alcohol-consumption-much-higher-than-reported-in-England-Boniface>
2. McManus S et al. Adult psychiatric morbidity in England, 2007: Results of a household survey. NHS Information Centre 2009
3. Corbett J, et al. Scottish Health Survey 2009, Volume 1: Main report. Scottish Government, Department of Health.
4. Sullivan LE et al; Am J Med. 2005;118(4):330-41.
5. Beulens JW et al; J Intern Med. 2012;272(4):358-70.
6. Beilin LJ, Puddey IB; Hypertension 2006;47:1035-1038.
7. Safe. Sensible. Social. The next steps in the National Alcohol Strategy. Department of Health 2004
8. British Liver Trust: Reducing alcohol harm: recovery and informed choice for those with alcohol related health problems. 2011
9. NHS Choices Website. [www.nhs.uk/Livewell/alcohol/Pages/alcohol-units.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/alcohol/Pages/alcohol-units.aspx).