

How much is too much?

Almost one in three men and nearly one in five women are now judged to be drinking too much alcohol. But how much is too much and how often is too often?

According to the charity Alcohol Concern, alcohol problems affect eight million people in the UK and this number is rising. So what are the definitions the nation is judged by?

WHAT IS BINGE DRINKING?

Binge drinking is drinking that gets you drunk, according to Alcohol Concern. Often others define it as drinking double the Department of Health recommendations or more in a single session; this means eight units for a man or six for a woman would be a binge.

However, some people who drink regularly would not be drunk at these levels, others would be very drunk indeed. For most people, it is easier to think of binge drinking as drinking to get drunk.

Alcohol Concern has launched a new website with an interactive test to help people decide whether they drink to excess, using government recommendations.

HOW MUCH ALCOHOL CAN YOU DRINK SAFELY?

According to the Department of Health men should not drink more than three to four units of alcohol a day, and women should drink no more than two to three. These benchmarks apply whether you drink every day, once or twice a week, or occasionally.

It also recommends people avoid alcohol for 48 hours after an episode of drunkenness to give their bodies time to recover.

Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) is how much alcohol is present in the blood. It is described in milligrams of alcohol per 100 millilitres of blood.

HOW QUICKLY DOES ALCOHOL WORK THROUGH THE BODY?

Most people's bodies will process one unit of alcohol per hour, so one hour after drinking one unit your Blood Alcohol Content (Bac) will return to zero or near zero. Drinking two units will take two hours and so on.

Because it takes time for your body to get rid of the alcohol, drinking more than one unit per hour will build up higher Blood Alcohol Concentrations and take longer for you to "sober up".

If you drink a very large amount in a short time period your body can become overwhelmed. If your BAC gets too high (around 400mg/ml) you may go into a coma and possibly die from alcohol poisoning.

WHAT IS THE DEFINITION OF BEING DEPENDENT ON ALCOHOL?

People can have problems with alcohol without being dependent on it. But if consumed frequently and in large quantities anyone can become dependent on alcohol.

The body adapts to the presence of alcohol and there will be a need to drink more for the same effect, if a person stops too quickly they will get the shakes and experience alcohol withdrawal syndrome, which can be medically dangerous.

Alcoholics can also be psychologically dependent on drink, using it to cope during difficult times in their lives or as the only way they can have fun.

WHAT DO YOU DEFINE AS BEING DRUNK IN THE PUB?

It's one of the peculiarities of the law that it's illegal to be drunk in a pub, and the government - under its plan to relax the licensing laws to allow 24-hour pub and bar opening - says this will be enforced.

But how is such a rule interpreted?

The law defines drunkenness as having drunk alcohol to the extent that you have "lost steady self-control".

In practice, the courts tend to use glazed eyes, slurred speech and unsteadiness as the yardstick.

Few people, if any, are in fact prosecuted for just being drunk - unless they are disorderly.

ARE DRINKS GETTING STRONGER?

Yes, in the last 10 years not only have drinks become stronger, but in the case of wine, glass sizes have become bigger.

A decade ago you could typically say a pint of lager or beer was two units. Now it is significantly more than that, while some premium lagers, such as Stella Artois, are more than three units a pint.

Alcohol Concern is calling for units to be displayed on bottles and pumps, but in the meantime it is recommending people research the drinks they drink. This can be found on its website.

WHAT EFFECT DO DIFFERENT DRINKS HAVE ON ME?

Claims that different drinks have different effects on you are considered anecdotal.

It is purely how much alcohol they contain. The idea that whisky is more dangerous than gin, for example, is untrue.

WHAT IS THE DRINK-DRIVE LIMIT?

The UK limit for being legal to drive is 80mg / 100 millilitres of blood - even at just under this level you are twice as likely to have an accident than if you had nothing to drink.

There is no fixed rule on how many drinks you can consume before hitting the road as everyone metabolises alcohol at a different rate.

It can depend on your size, what you have eaten recently and your gender - but a single large 250ml glass of wine as served in many pubs is enough to put many people over the drink-drive limit, as is two pints of normal-strength beer.