

Alcohol and diabetes

Can I still drink alcohol now that I have diabetes?

Alcohol recommendations for people who have diabetes are no different to those for the general population. The message is to:

'Drink alcohol only in moderation'

What is 'drinking only in moderation'?

This means you should set yourself some limits each day and week:

Men: no more than three units each day

Women: no more than two units each day

What is a unit of alcohol?

One unit of alcohol can be:

- ½ pint beer, lager, or cider or
- 1 standard glass of wine or
- 1 pub measure of spirits (eg gin, vodka, or whisky).

Why is it best to drink only in moderation?

- Excessive amounts of alcohol can increase the risk of developing heart disease (by increasing blood pressure and triglycerides), liver disease and some types of cancers.
- Alcohol can cause hypoglycaemia ('hypos') ie low blood sugar levels; therefore, never drink on an empty stomach.
- Alcohol is high in calories (ie energy); if you reduce your intake, it can help you lose weight.

Practical guidelines for drinking less

- Have two or three alcohol-free days each week.
- Sip alcohol only slowly.
- Drink water or diet drinks before you drink alcohol - this will ensure that you don't drink too much alcohol just because you are thirsty.
- Drink a non-alcoholic drink (eg diet coke, soda water) between each alcoholic drink - helps you reduce the amount you drink and rehydrates you.
- Drink beer that is only low-alcohol, and use sugar-free mixers.
- Dilute your alcohol - for example, make a beer shandy by adding sugar-free lemonade or dilute wine with soda water.

What are alcohol-related hypos?

- If you are taking insulin or some types of diabetes tablets, you are at risk of alcohol-related hypoglycaemia (ie when blood glucose levels are less than 4 mmol/L). If you are unsure whether your diabetes medication has this effect, please ask your doctor, practice nurse or dietitian.
- Alcohol-related hypos are dangerous because people can think you are drunk and so not assist you medically. For more information on hypos, see the separate information sheet: *Hypoglycaemia ('hypos')*.

Tips to avoid alcohol-related hypos:

- Avoid drinking on an empty stomach.
- Ensure that you include starchy carbohydrate foods (such as potato, pasta or bread) in the meals you eat before drinking.

- When drinking alcohol, always have a carbohydrate-rich snack before going to bed, and eat breakfast as soon as you wake up in the morning.
- Avoid drinking excessive amounts of alcohol - more than three units each day for men and two units for women is excessive.
- Always carry some carbohydrate snacks [eg jelly beans, glucose tablets (eg Dextrol) or ordinary lemonade] with you in case of a hypo.
- Avoid alcohol after vigorous exercise.
- Always wear some form of diabetes identification - because a hypo might be confused with drunkenness.
- It is wise to tell the person you are drinking with that you have diabetes.

Alcohol and weight gain

- Alcohol is high in calories - eg a pint of ordinary beer contains 180 calories. Drinking alcohol in excess can, therefore, contribute to excess weight gain.
- People often eat more after drinking alcohol excessively, and especially when they are hung over.
- Being overweight can cause your diabetes control to worsen, leading to high blood glucose levels and poor health.
- If you drink significant amounts of alcohol and are overweight, cutting back on the amount you drink can help you lose weight.

For further information contact:

- **Diabetes UK:** 10 Parkway, London NW1 7AA; Careline 0845 1202 960;
www.diabetes.org.uk
- **Your GP:**
- **Your nurse:**
- **Your dietitian:**