



In Focus

Alcohol Guidelines in the United Kingdom

Overview

On 8 January 2016, the Department of Health published [changes to the alcohol guidelines for the United Kingdom](#). These replace the previous set of guidelines published in 1995. Under those previous recommendations, the weekly alcohol limit was 21 units for men and 14 units for women. However, the new guidelines advise limiting the weekly alcohol intake for both men and women to [14 units per week](#). The guidelines also advise that pregnant women should avoid drinking any alcohol for the duration of their pregnancy, as alcohol can lead to “[long-term harm](#)” to their baby.

The move to update the alcohol guidelines follows a review by two expert groups in health and behaviour in 2012, [commissioned](#) by the United Kingdom’s Chief Medical Officers. The groups’ [found](#) that there was “[significant new, good quality evidence](#)” not available at the time of the previous review in 1995 regarding the effects of alcohol consumption on a person’s health, and that “stronger evidence has emerged that the risk of a range of cancers, especially breast cancer, increases directly in line with consumption of any amount of alcohol”.

The Health Effects of Alcohol Consumption

According to the [National Health Service \(NHS\)](#), regularly drinking more than 14 units of alcohol per week risks “[damaging a person’s health](#)”. NHS advice states that alcohol can lead to illnesses developing after ten to twenty years of regular drinking, such as mouth, throat and breast cancer, strokes, heart and liver diseases and damage to the brain and nervous system. The NHS also [advise](#) that, whilst pregnant, women should refrain from drinking alcohol at all. They note that when a pregnant woman drinks alcohol, it passes from the bloodstream through the placenta and to the baby. With the liver one of the last organs to develop, too much exposure to alcohol in the first three months of pregnancy can potentially “seriously affect [babies’] development”. In addition, drinking alcohol during pregnancy can also [increase the risk](#) of miscarriage, premature birth and low birthweight. Further, should women choose to drink after the first three months of their pregnancy, evidence suggests it can affect their baby after the birth, with the [effects including learning difficulties and behavioural problems](#).

The [Health and Social Care Information Centre](#) report that between 2003/04–2012/13, there had been a 37 percent rise in alcohol related hospital admissions in England (from 236,770 to 325,870 per year). Further, the [Office for National Statistics](#) found that there were 8,416 alcohol-related deaths registered in the United Kingdom in 2013.

International Comparisons

The following table reveals recommended limits on alcohol intake for twelve European countries, taken from their respective alcohol guidelines, in comparison with the UK:

Recommended Limits on Alcohol Intake per Week (Units)

Country	Men	Women
Denmark	32	21
Estonia	18	9
Finland	36	24
France	26	18
Ireland	26	18
Italy	18–35	9–18
Malta	21–26	14–18
Netherlands	18	9
Slovenia	18	9
Spain	35	21
Sweden	21	14
Switzerland	18–26	9–18
United Kingdom	14	14

Source: BBC News, '[New Alcohol Guidelines: What you Need to Know](#)', 8 January 2016

Stakeholder Reaction

Following the publication of the new alcohol guidelines for the United Kingdom, the Chief Medical Officer for England, Dame Sally Davies, [stated](#) that “drinking any level of alcohol regularly carries a health risk for anyone, but if men and women limit their intake to no more than 14 units a week it keeps the risk of illness like cancer and liver disease low”. In addition, Dr Niamh Fitzgerald, a lecturer in alcohol studies at the University of Stirling, [argued](#) that, despite most people knowing about the links between smoking and cancer, “far fewer [people] are aware of evidence linking alcohol consumption with an increased risk of future health problems”, and that as a result, the purpose of the guidelines are to “to provide the public with the latest accurate information on how they can reduce health risks from alcohol”. However, Mike Benner, Managing Director at the Society for Independent Brewers [contended](#) that men who consumed approximately 14 and 21 units of alcohol a week “will be surprised to suddenly find themselves in an ‘at risk’ category”, which he argued “may affect the guidelines’ credibility with many responsible drinkers, not least because they are significantly lower than guidelines in various other countries”.

Further Information

- Department of Health, [UK Chief Medical Officer’s Alcohol Guidelines Review](#), January 2016

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