



Alcohol and Depression

Most people in Scotland drink alcohol. Many say that it helps them to relax, and feel more sociable and confident. This is the same for people whether or not they have Depression. When you're feeling low or depressed, it might seem that alcohol lifts your mood to feel more like your old self and helps you to cope with life. These feelings are not long-lasting, and research has shown there to be a significant connection between alcohol and Depression. While it won't be a problem for everyone, it is good to be aware of how alcohol might be affecting your mental health.

How can alcohol cause me problems?

Problems with alcohol can affect you at all stages of life whether you are young, middle aged or in later life. It's easy to become trapped in a cycle of drinking to relieve your feelings of Depression and anxiety, but:

- People who drink a lot have been found to be more likely to have Depression and vice versa – heavy drinking is more common in those with Depression.
- The same is true for anxiety: anxious people may drink more and drinking a lot can lead to people who are not normally affected by anxiety experiencing these symptoms.
- Drinking affects your sleep. Alcohol actually causes you to have a lighter sleep, so you may wake more in the night. Sleep disturbances are also common in people with Depression and drinking can make these worse.
- Self-harm and suicide are much more common in people who drink a lot. As many as 65% of suicides have been linked to heavy drinking, while almost a third of suicides among young people are committed while the person has been drinking. Drinking a lot can reduce your inhibitions and make you more impulsive and likely to act on thoughts of self-harm or suicide.
- Drinking heavily can often have an effect on relationships, work and self esteem. It may also contribute to stresses such as debt, accidents, violence and involvement with the law.

How does alcohol affect my mood?

Using alcohol to regulate your mood can cause problems because alcohol can have a depressive effect. Things that can affect your emotional state when drinking include how you



Some signs of Depression

- Feeling unhappy, miserable and lonely a lot of the time
- Feeling negative or hopeless about your life and the future
- Feeling guilty, bad or inadequate
- Feeling agitated, anxious, irritable or moody
- No longer enjoying the things that you used to like doing
- Loss of sex drive
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Difficulty getting to sleep and / or waking early
- Poor concentration and loss of energy or motivation
- Not looking after your personal appearance
- Frequent minor health problems, such as headaches, back pain or stomach-aches
- Not liking yourself, feeling ugly
- Suicidal thoughts
- Self-harming behaviour including heavy drinking

If you notice several of these symptoms have been present for more than two weeks and are affecting your life, contact one of the the organisations listed on this factsheet or talk to your GP.

feel before you start drinking, whether you drink alone or with others, what you expect the effect to be and, of course, the amount you consume.

Alcohol affects many different parts of your brain. Despite what many people think, drinking a lot dulls the 'feel good' systems in your brain. This means you need to drink more to get the same good feelings that you had at the start. Low mood and unpleasant feelings on stopping drinking are also more common if you have been drinking heavily. This can lead to a vicious circle where you drink to block out the unpleasant feelings caused by drinking or to forget your problems, which then causes more unpleasant feelings leading you to drink even more.

Alcohol and antidepressant medication

If you are taking antidepressants, it is best to talk to your GP or pharmacist about the effect of alcohol on your medication: Generally people on medication are advised not to drink alcohol, except in some small amounts, because:

- Alcohol can counteract the potential benefits of the prescribed antidepressant drug.
- Some antidepressants also have a sedative effect and alcohol will increase this sedative effect. This increases drowsiness and the likelihood of accidents.
- The combination of drinking and taking medication may put a strain on your liver.

When should I think about cutting down?

Not everyone who has Depression and who drinks will have a problem with alcohol. However if you are regularly drinking over the sensible limits (see box to the right), it is a good idea to cut down. Particular danger signs to look out for are drinking more and using alcohol to block out your feelings, taking time off work because of hangovers, being criticised by family or friends because of your drinking, or drinking to 'cure' a hangover. Using alcohol as a coping strategy for stress or to get through the day is another danger sign.

Sensible limits

- **Men:** No more than 3-4 units a day and no more than 21 units a week.
- **Women:** No more than 2-3 units a day and no more than 14 units a week.

We all need at least 2 days a week without alcohol. Doctors agree that drinking more than the sensible limit damages your health in the short and long term. Heavy drinking has also been found to increase your risk of being affected by Depression or anxiety.

People who have Depression who are also drinking a lot should notice an improvement in their mood after a few weeks of cutting down or stopping drinking. It won't necessarily be easy to cut down your drinking. If you are drinking heavily, you should seek medical advice as there can be health issues if you stop suddenly. Your GP can give you advice. You can also phone Drinkline or contact one of the organisations listed at the bottom of this factsheet. Your family and friends may also be another source of support.

Tips for cutting down

- Set a realistic maximum daily limit.
- Work gradually down to the sensible limits listed above. Include 2 alcohol-free days per week.
- Pace yourself. Slow down and take small sips not big gulps.
- Occupy yourself - do something else enjoyable while drinking to help you drink more slowly.
- Keep a drinking diary so you can keep track of how much you're drinking and recognise risky circumstances.
- Change your drink - try a lower alcohol beer or wine, or top up spirits with more mixer.
- Involve your friends and family in planning nights out that don't involve alcohol - go to the gym, cinema, local café, bowling etc, or agree as a group that you won't drink.

For help and support

- **Depression Alliance Scotland** 0845 123 23 20, info@dascot.org, www.dascot.org
- **Alcohol Focus Scotland** 0141 572 6700, enquiries@alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk, www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk

Helplines

- **Drinkline** 0800 7 314 314 (open 24 hours, 7 days a week) for free, confidential advice on alcohol and how to cut down.
- **Samaritans** 08457 909090 (open 24 hours, 7 days a week), jo@samaritans.org, www.samaritans.org
- **Breathing Space** 0800 83 85 87 (6pm - 2am weeknights and all weekend from Friday at 6pm) www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk