



Alcohol and the Eye

Drinking alcohol is enjoyable and most of the time, drinking doesn't cause any problems. But drinking too much or at the wrong time can be harmful. The important thing is to know where the benefits end and the risks begin.

In **moderate amounts** alcohol is thought to be beneficial, reducing the risk of coronary heart disease.

Heavy or excessive drinking increases the risk of high blood pressure, stroke (cerebral haemorrhage), coronary heart disease and heartbeat irregularities. People who drink large amounts of alcohol over long periods of time are also at much greater risk of liver damage, which may lead to alcoholic hepatitis and cirrhosis. In addition :

- *Excessive alcohol intake* during pregnancy can lead to the foetal alcohol syndrome. This syndrome includes ocular anomalies and other neurological deficits such as mental retardation and deafness.
- *Alcohol abuse*, particularly in heavy smokers who have also neglected their diet, is known to cause a toxic, progressive optic neuropathy. Typically this causes bilateral, symmetrical, painless, visual impairment with loss of colour vision and a central visual field defect.

The Department of Health advises that sensible drinking limits are defined as no more than 21 units a week for adult males and 14 units a week for adult females. To reduce health risks from drinking, this should be spread over the week, 3 - 4 units of alcohol per day for men, and 2 - 3 units of alcohol per day for women. These daily benchmarks apply whether you drink every day, once or twice a week, or occasionally.

<http://www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/Alcohol/Pages/Alcoholhome.aspx>

What is a unit of alcohol?

A unit of alcohol is 10ml of pure alcohol. Counting units of alcohol can help us to keep track of the amount we're drinking. The list below shows the number of units of alcohol in common drinks:-

- A pint of ordinary strength lager (Carling Black Label, Fosters) - 2 units
- A pint of strong lager (Stella Artois, Kronenbourg 1664) - 3 units
- A pint of bitter (John Smith's, Boddingtons) - 2 units
- A pint of ordinary strength cider (Dry Blackthorn, Strongbow) - 2 units
- A 175ml glass of red or white wine - around 2 units
- A pub measure of spirits - 1 unit
- An alcopop (eg Smirnoff Ice, Bacardi Breezer, WKD, Reef) - around 1.5 units

Eye diseases such as cataract, glaucoma, and age related macula degeneration and diabetic retinopathy, are the most common causes of visual impairment and blindness in this country. Studies that have specifically examined the relationship between alcohol consumption and the risk of developing these eye conditions have so far yielded mixed results, and as such the role of alcohol consumption on their development has not yet been established. Despite this, consuming alcohol within the recommended daily limits is the most sensible way to maintain good health and ultimately healthy eyes and good vision.

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