Contents

Introduction ........................................................... 1
What determines our drinking habits? ................ 5
Alcohol and health .................................................. 18
Effects of drinking on daily life .......................... 40
How to recognise a drinking problem ............... 59
How to change your drinking pattern ............... 68
Advice for family, friends and colleagues .......... 87
Children, teenagers and parents ....................... 93
Drinking, driving, working and the law ............ 98
Useful addresses ..................................................... 104
Index .................................................................. 113
Your pages .............................................................. 122

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Case history: Mr Roberts

Mr Roberts was finding work increasingly difficult and dreaded the tension he felt in the mornings. He had enjoyed a drink after work for years, but now his wife and children were complaining about his irritability and asking why he was no longer the reliable husband and father they knew.

When his doctor checked his blood pressure he also asked him about his drinking. An explanation of how alcohol could actually cause tension did not make sense to him at first, but he agreed to have three weeks free of alcohol – and he felt much better.

He decided to cut drinking out of his life. With his family’s support and advice from his GP, he found this much easier than he had feared, and was soon back to his former vigour and enthusiasm for family life and work.

Introduction

About the author

Dr Jonathan Chick is a consultant psychiatrist at the Alcohol Problems Clinic, Royal Edinburgh Hospital. His practice and research into the early recognition and treatment of problem drinking are acknowledged worldwide. Dr Chick has advised government departments in the USA, Canada, Australia and Britain.
Is too much alcohol a common problem?
Out of the UK population of 60 million people, 36 million of us are regular drinkers. Two million are heavy drinkers, and there are a million men and women in Britain who have, or have had, a serious drinking problem.

Of those, 200,000 are dependent on alcohol each day of their lives. More women are now drinking than ever before in this century. Although alcohol-related problems used to affect far more men than women, women now seek counselling for drinking problems as frequently as men.

This book explains how alcohol can have a variety of harmful as well as pleasant effects. It gives guidance on how to change a drinking pattern and succeed – whether by cutting down or abstaining completely.

Out of the UK population of 60 million people, 36 million of us are regular drinkers.
KEY POINTS

■ In the UK 36 million people are regular drinkers
■ Women seek counselling for drinking problems as frequently as men

What determines our drinking habits?

What is alcohol?
Beer, wine, spirits, cider, and the scores of other drinks fermented or distilled around the world, all contain ethanol. Ethanol, which belongs to a group of chemical substances called alcohols, is produced when yeast assists the fermentation of sugar to form ethanol and carbon dioxide.
How much ethanol is in alcoholic drinks?
The amount of ethanol produced is controlled either by the quantity of sugar added or by the ethanol level reaching 14 per cent by volume, after which the yeast cannot survive. The carbon dioxide produced forms the ‘head’ on a glass of beer and the bubbles in champagne.

The process of distillation – boiling off and concentrating the ethanol part of the beverage – was discovered in the Middle East in AD 800 by a man called Jahir ibn Hayyan. Distillation allows more concentrated and potent alcoholic drinks to be produced.

What else is in alcoholic drinks?
Other constituents (sometimes called congeners) in alcoholic drinks contribute to the taste that we may enjoy, but can also cause headache and a hangover if we have drunk a lot. The amount of congener varies – drinks with a dark colour such as red wine or brandy contain more congeners, and so cause more of a hangover than pale drinks.

How does alcohol affect us?
Although other constituents give drinks their colour, taste and character, it is ethanol that causes a change in our brain. This change can, if the circumstances are right, lead us to feel merry and talkative, or relaxed and sleepy. It is ethanol that helps us let our hair down.

Celebrating, marking special events and meeting up with friends have become occasions for drinking. The advertising and marketing of the drinks industry are designed to make sure that we continue to believe in the good things about alcohol.

Ethanol also causes some of the unpleasant effects of being intoxicated – such as the slowing of our thinking and our reactions, irritability and the tendency to do things on the spur of the moment which may be regretted later.

What are common measurements of alcohol?

Units
Many people nowadays talk in terms of ‘units’ of alcohol, to measure the amount. A pub measure of spirits (25 millilitres) counts as one unit. A 275 ml bottle of an Alcopop contains one and a half units.

What is a unit of alcohol?
A unit of alcohol is a handy measure and can be used to estimate the amount of alcohol that we drink. As a guide, the drinks shown below contain about one unit, but this varies depending on the strength of alcohol in the drink and the size of the glass.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drink</th>
<th>Alcohol Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A small glass of sherry or fortified wine</td>
<td>1 unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A standard glass of wine (125 ml)</td>
<td>1 unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>½ pint of beer or cider</td>
<td>1 unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¼ pint of strong lager</td>
<td>1 unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A one-litre bottle of spirits – brandy, whisky or gin – contains about 40 units of alcohol</td>
<td>40 units</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A single measure of aperitif or spirit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drink</th>
<th>Alcohol Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WHAT DETERMINES OUR DRINKING HABITS?

Percentage of alcohol by volume
The strength of a drink is measured as the alcohol content as a percentage, or percentage by volume (%v/v), for example, spirits 40%v/v, beer 3–5%v/v, Alcopops 5%v/v.

How is the strength of an alcoholic drink measured?
The strength of a drink is measured as the alcohol content as a percentage of the volume. This is expressed as percentage by volume or %v/v. The pie charts show the usual alcohol content found in some commonly drunk alcoholic drinks.

- **Beers**
  Contain between 3 and 6%v/v

- **Wines**
  Contain between 8 and 14%v/v

- **Sherry**
  Contains between 15 and 20%v/v

- **Liqueurs**
  Contain between 20 and 55%v/v

- **Whisky, gin and rum**
  Contain 40%v/v

Key
- **Red** = alcohol minimum
- **Light Pink** = alcohol maximum
- **Light Blue** = other substances

Amount of alcohol in blood
For the purposes of measuring alcohol concentration in blood, we use the amount of alcohol (in milligrams) found in 100 millilitres of blood. This is written as ‘mg per 100 ml blood’ or ‘mg%’.

How does alcohol affect us?
As a very rough guide, one unit of alcohol drunk on an empty stomach results in a peak alcohol level of 15 mg% in a man. This figure will be up to 30 per cent higher in a woman, for reasons that we explain later.

The present legal limit for driving is 80 mg%. At this level, the risk of having a road accident is more than doubled. In experiments, bus drivers with alcohol levels of only 50 mg% (below the legal limit) thought that they could drive through obstacles too narrow for their buses.

One unit of alcohol drunk on an empty stomach results in a peak alcohol level of 15 mg% in a man. This figure will be up to 30 per cent higher in a woman.
Concentrations of 400 mg% could block the brain’s breathing control centre and be fatal, especially if sedative drugs have been taken as well.

**Breath tests**

In breath tests, the units used are micrograms (µg) per 100 ml of breath. The breathalyser measures the alcohol contained in each 100 ml of breath. The present legal limit for driving is 35 µg per 100 ml breath (0.35 mg per litre).

On average, the body removes alcohol from the blood at about 15 mg% per hour (that is, about one unit of alcohol is cleared per hour). This means that a person who drinks eight pints one night may still be over the legal limit driving to work the next day.

**Are we drinking more than we used to?**

Compared with 100 years ago, the British are probably drinking less. Gin and beer used to be cheap, and we were great importers of brandy and wine.

In 1914 Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, was worried about the effect of alcohol on the industrial effort needed for the war, so steps were taken to reduce sales. Consumption fell dramatically and remained low in the depression years between the wars.

Consumption began to increase in 1950, however, as prosperity in Britain returned. Tax on alcoholic drinks had limited drinking, but consumption has increased since 1950, as the tax imposed became a smaller proportion of people’s wages.

In real terms, alcohol became cheaper. From 1965 to 2000, the amount that each adult was drinking, on average, doubled.

Today, drinking problems are increasing. The UK death rate for alcoholic liver disease doubled from 1990 to 2000.

Young people in Britain have increased the amount that they drink in a session. Young Danes are the drinkers in Europe who most often drink to get drunk.

**What affects individual drinking habits?**

**Genetics**

Some people dislike the taste or the effect of alcohol. Others like the effect from the start. This reflects their personality and their genes.