



# Alcohol and You

Facts, tips and support to help you cut down or cut out alcohol and protect your health and wellbeing

# Who we are

Drinkaware is the national charity working to prevent and reduce alcohol misuse in Ireland, governed by an independent board and regulated by the Charities Regulator.

We do this through our evidence-informed programmes at a community level with the public and online, through post-primary school teachers, parents and in workplaces. The national research we commission encourages greater understanding of alcohol consumption and its impact on individuals, families and society as a whole. The health promotion resources we provide offer practical ways to drink less or cut out alcohol to protect health and wellbeing. As recommended by the World Health Organisation, Drinkaware takes a multi-faceted approach to reducing alcohol misuse and harm.

## Our two ambitious goals are to

- « Reduce risky drinking
- « Shift expectations of underage drinking

# What we do

## Outreach & Engagement

Drinkaware designs and delivers ongoing media, face to face and digital campaigns and produces evidence-informed tools and resources for the general public. These health promotion resources and campaigns are also widely utilised by community, health, civil society organisations, youth and education organisations.

## Research

Drinkaware conducts and commissions regular, robust national research studies to explore the attitudes, behaviours and drivers of alcohol consumption among adults in Ireland. We also carry out research to assess parental attitudes towards underage drinking, role modelling, and their understanding of the risks associated with early alcohol use. Our research is rigorously analysed, used to inform our work and is shared with mission-aligned organisations.

## Education

Drinkaware's public health remit includes tackling underage drinking. We do this by empowering teachers and parents to support their students and children to have a better awareness and understanding of the facts regarding alcohol and alcohol-related harm. Our school-based work includes parent workshops and the evidence-informed Alcohol Education Programme (AEP), which is aligned to the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Curriculum. A TY version of the Programme is also currently being piloted.

# Alcohol in Ireland

Alcohol-related harms are significant and experienced by each of us as individuals as well as society as a whole. This includes alcohol-related hospital admissions, workplace losses due to absenteeism or productivity, and costs associated with crime.

Alcohol can harm much more than our personal health and wellbeing, relationships and career. Its negative impacts also include significant costs to the economy, public safety and it places a burden on healthcare services. It is estimated that the economic cost of alcohol-related harm in Ireland is €3 billion each year<sup>1</sup>.

Ireland has one of the highest binge drinking rates in Europe. 50% of Irish adults believe that drinking to excess is just part of Irish culture<sup>2</sup>, however this figure was 74% in 2019<sup>3</sup> so we are seeing signs of a positive culture shift.



**23%**

of adults do not drink alcohol



**61%**

of weekly drinking occasions take place at home



**52%**

drink on at least a weekly basis



**30%**

would like to drink alcohol less often



**51%**

of current drinkers cite coping as their motivation for drinking



**35%**

have already made small positive changes to their drinking habits changes



**1 in 4**

adults binge drink on a typical day of drinking

# What is a standard drink?

A standard drink is a measure of alcohol. In Ireland, one standard drink contains 10 grams of pure alcohol. Common examples are a half pint of 4.5% lager, 100ml glass of 12.5% wine or a pub measure (35.5ml) of 40% spirits. It takes at least one hour to process one standard drink.

## What will affect the number of standard drinks?

It's Important to keep in mind

### Alcohol strength (%ABV)

Different drinks have a different alcohol content, usually shown on labels as alcohol by volume (%ABV). Higher alcohol strength means a higher standard drink content.

### Size of the measure

Free-pouring spirits or wine can mean that you are drinking larger measures than you planned. Order our standard drink measure at [drinkaware.ie](http://drinkaware.ie) to keep track at home.

### Size of the glass

One glass does not always mean one standard drink. Some glasses can hold huge - and risky - amounts of alcohol. This is especially true for wine and gin glasses.



Bottle of lager  
(4.5%, 330ml)



Glass of  
sparkling wine  
(11.5%, 125ml)



1/4 bottle of wine  
(12.5%, 187.5ml)



Alcopop  
(4%, 275ml)



Pint of cider  
(4.5%, 568ml)



## Standard drinks are not the same as units

One UK unit contains 8 grams of pure alcohol, compared to 10 grams in one Irish standard drink.

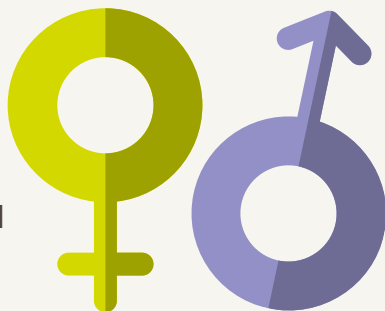
# What are the low-risk weekly guidelines?

Low-risk drinking reduces your risk of alcohol-related harm. Knowing the guidelines can help you to understand how much you're drinking in the week. Remember, these are guidelines - not a target.

Female

11

No more than **11**  
standard drinks  
(110g alcohol)



Male

17

No more than **17**  
standard drinks  
(170g alcohol)



## Can I drink these in one sitting?

Space out any drinking over the week to give your body a break and time to recover. Having at least two alcohol-free days in the week (more is even better) is good for your physical and mental health. This can also help to break the cycle of a habit that may be forming.



## What about children and teenagers?

These guidelines are for adults only. **There is no safe amount of alcohol for children.** Early alcohol use can cause a range of harms including damaging brain development and future dependency. If teenagers choose to start drinking alcohol, it is strongly advised to wait until the legal drinking age of 18 years. An alcohol-free childhood is healthiest.

Read more at [drinkaware.ie/understanding-alcohol](https://drinkaware.ie/understanding-alcohol)

97%

of adults do not know the  
low-risk weekly guidelines

Barometer 2022

## The low-risk guidelines are the equivalent of:

8.5 cans of lager = **17** standard drinks



One can lager = 500ml, 4.5%

5.5 cans of lager = **11** standard drinks

These examples aim to illustrate the guidelines in well-known drinks. There are many different ways to show the equivalent of the guidelines in different drinks.

## What is binge drinking?

Binge drinking (or heavy episodic drinking) is consuming 6 or more standard drinks in one sitting, usually in a short space of time. The term 'binge drinking' is a clinical definition used by the World Health Organisation and HSE.

Our liver can process approximately one standard drink per hour. When you binge, you're drinking faster than your liver can handle. This means that the liver's ability to process alcohol AND complete all the other essential functions it performs is affected.

Read about these risks on page 7



4 Glasses of Wine  
(4 x 150ml, 12.5%)



3 Pints of Lager  
(3 x 568ml, 4.5%)



5 Bottles of Cider  
(5 x 330ml, 4.5%)



**1 in 4 adults** in Ireland binge drink on a typical occasion

Drinkaware Barometer 2022

If you don't know what 'risky drinking' looks like it can be difficult to understand how to make positive changes to your drinking habits. Understanding these guidelines means you have the information to make changes for the better and can avoid binge or risky drinking.

# How can alcohol affect my health?

Alcohol's impact is far-reaching, from our physical health and mental wellbeing to our relationships, work environment and wider society. If you drink alcohol, it's likely that you have experienced some of the harms in this section.

Keep in mind that some alcohol-related health problems can take many years to develop. This means that how much and how often we drink now can affect our health in the future.

There are many positive actions we can take to reduce our risk of experiencing alcohol-related harms. A great first step is to know the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines and have at least two alcohol-free days in the week.

## Short-term effects

### Anxiety

Alcohol is a depressant that disrupts how the brain functions and affects our thoughts, feelings and actions<sup>4</sup>. The morning after drinking alcohol, you may notice you're feeling down or anxious. Alcohol has an effect on various chemicals in your brain including serotonin and dopamine. These changes can make you feel good while you're drinking but once the effect has worn off, feelings of anxiety or depression are common. In Ireland, this is casually known as "the fear".

### Weight gain

Alcohol contains 7 calories (pure fat has 9 calories) and depending on the drink, it can also contain a lot of sugar. Drinking less or cutting out alcohol can help to maintain a healthy weight and appearance.

### Sleep

Drinking alcohol can disrupt your sleep. Alcohol is a sedative, which may help you fall asleep in the short term, but once the sedative effect wears off, your body starts to react to the effects of alcohol and sleep quality is reduced. Binge drinking is particularly damaging to the quality of your sleep.

### Nausea

When you drink alcohol, more acid is produced in the stomach than normal and this results in feelings of nausea. The lining of the stomach can become inflamed, contributing to stomach pain or reflux (heartburn).

### Impaired judgement

When you drink alcohol, you can feel more relaxed. This might cause you to do things you wouldn't consider if you were sober because your ability to make safe decisions is reduced. This can include taking more risks which could lead to experiencing or causing injuries or accidents. Impaired judgement can also lead to issues to our relationships, arguments, and a lack of reliability can put a strain on our relationships with other people, friends and family.

### Injuries and accidents<sup>5</sup>

Alcohol use can increase your risk of experiencing or causing accidents (including road accidents), falls and burns. And because alcohol can reduce inhibitions, it may lead to more violent behaviour in yourself or others

### Lack of concentration

Alcohol is a sedative and can cause slower reflexes which is especially dangerous if you are driving or operating machinery. It can also disrupt your focus, making ordinarily simple tasks more difficult to complete. This can disrupt work performance and impact on activity and exercise.

### Increased spending

Drinking regularly can have a negative impact on your bank balance. Use the Drinkaware drinks calculator to see how much your weekly drinking is impacting your bank account. [drinkaware.ie/drinks-calculator/](https://drinkaware.ie/drinks-calculator/)

# Long-term effects



## Depression<sup>6</sup>

Alcohol consumption can contribute to depression due to the various psychological effects of alcohol and impacts on mental health. Alcohol affects the levels chemicals or neurotransmitters in our brain, for example, serotonin, which regulates happiness. The enjoyable effect of alcohol is temporary, and you may even feel worse after drinking. Attempts to cope with the feelings and symptoms of depression may lead some people to drink more to cope and this can become a cycle.



## Heart disease and Stroke<sup>7</sup>

Regularly drinking above the low-risk guidelines raises your blood pressure. This means your heart has to work harder to pump blood around the body. High blood pressure is the leading cause of heart attack and stroke in Ireland.

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# 24%

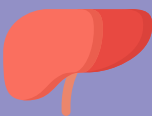
of Irish adults believe they may experience future health problems as a result of their drinking habits<sup>2</sup>

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## Pancreas<sup>8</sup>

Excessive alcohol use can cause the pancreas to produce toxins which cause pancreatitis. Pancreatitis can be either acute (sudden onset) or chronic (develops over time). Acute pancreatitis can be life-threatening or can lead to the development of type 2 diabetes.



## Liver disease<sup>9</sup>

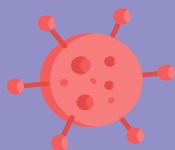
One of the roles of the liver is to get rid of toxins from the body. The byproduct of alcohol is a toxin, so excess alcohol intake places extra pressure on the liver. The type of alcohol, how fast and how much you drink can prevent the liver from working properly. Regularly drinking more than the low-risk weekly guidelines can increase the risk of fatty liver (steatosis), inflammation of the liver (hepatitis) and cirrhosis (scarring of liver tissue).





## Pregnancy<sup>10</sup>

There is no safe amount and no safe time for alcohol during pregnancy. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause foetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD). The most serious FASD is foetal alcohol syndrome. Alcohol can damage the developing brain and body by passing from the mother's blood into the baby's blood through the placenta.



## Cancer<sup>11</sup>

Alcohol is a known risk factor for at least seven types of cancer – bowel, breast, liver, mouth, voice box (larynx), oesophagus (foodpipe) and throat (pharynx). Every year in Ireland, 900 people are diagnosed with alcohol-related cancers and approximately 500 die as a result. Bowel and breast cancers are among the most common in Ireland.

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1 in 8

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breast cancers in Ireland are alcohol-related<sup>12</sup>

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## Breast cancer<sup>12</sup>

For women, the greatest impact from alcohol is in relation to breast cancer. Even low levels of alcohol consumption (just over 1 standard drink per day) can increase a woman's risk of breast cancer. Alcohol isn't the only risk factor, but it is one we can control. Drinking alcohol doesn't mean you will develop breast cancer – but it does mean the risk is higher.

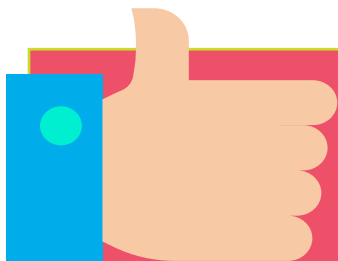


## Bowel cancer<sup>13,14</sup>

For men, the impact from alcohol is linked to bowel cancer. A 2017 European study found that 1-4 drinks per day increases the risk of bowel cancer by 21%. The HSE National Cancer Prevention Programme reports that among men, around 100 cases of bowel cancer are caused by alcohol each year (1 in every 12 cases).

Read more about alcohol's impact on your health at  
[drinkaware.ie/alcohols-impact-on-health](https://drinkaware.ie/alcohols-impact-on-health)

# Benefits of drinking less or cutting out alcohol



Taking a break from alcohol is one of the best things you can do for your health.

## Ready to make a change?

The good news is that there is so much to gain from drinking within the guidelines, taking a break from alcohol or cutting it out entirely. You won't be alone in your efforts – 1 in 3 adults in Ireland have already made positive changes to their drinking habits. Let's explore just some of the benefits you may experience.

### Short-term benefits

Drinking less or taking a break from alcohol can lead to

- « Lower blood pressure
- « No hangovers
- « Less headaches
- « Weight loss
- « Better sleep
- « Less injuries
- « More energy
- « Lower blood sugar

### Long-term benefits

Drinking within the guidelines can reduce your risk of

- « 7 types of cancer
- « Liver disease
- « Depression and anxiety
- « Stroke
- « High blood pressure
- « Stomach problems
- « Sexual dysfunction
- « Pancreatitis



## Mental health

One of the first benefits you're likely to notice is that your mood improves. Because you're not experiencing the low mood, anxiety and tiredness associated with the day after drinking, you'll have more time to spend doing things that make you happy. Not to mention the long-term mental health benefits of reducing your risk of depression and anxiety. Boost your mood by spending time doing activities you enjoy, meeting with friends, exercising, reading, whatever makes you feel relaxed and happy.



## Physical health

With such a long list of alcohol-related health harms, it is no surprise that protecting physical health is the top motivation for cutting down on alcohol among adults in Ireland. In the short-term, this has all kinds of benefits like lower blood sugar, weight loss and fewer associated negative consequences like a headache or heartburn. Drinking less also lowers your blood pressure, and this can help to reduce your risk of heart attack and stroke. Over time, by drinking less alcohol, you can reduce your risk of other serious health problems like cancer, liver disease and pancreatitis.



## Healthier appearance

If you're trying to maintain a healthy weight, cutting back on alcohol can help. Less alcohol means less calories. Plus, your physical and mental health will thank you for less regular late-night snacking or junk food the following day. Other benefits include less bloating and your skin should appear more hydrated.



## Better sleep

Better quality sleep is the benefit that keeps on giving. An alcohol-free sleep means deeper and less interrupted rest that means you'll wake up feeling refreshed and with full of energy to take on the day ahead. This can help increase your concentration, memory and productivity. With more energy, you're more likely to attend that morning weekend workout session you booked earlier in the week, which is great for your mind and body. Your fitness efforts should start to show results a bit quicker too.



## Save money

So often, we don't consider how much money we spend on alcohol, but even a weekly total can quickly add up. Use our online drinks calculator to see how much you spend on alcohol in an average week. If you're spending more than you would like, think about how much you could save by cutting down or cutting out alcohol.

# Explore sober curious and mindful drinking

You may have heard about 'mindful drinking' and 'sober curious' lifestyles. This global movement is being led by health-conscious younger adults and is now embraced by all ages. But what exactly does this mean and how can we practice this new mindset?

Mindful drinking is an attitude. When you drink mindfully, you become more aware of how alcohol affects your mind and body. And it's up to you decide if you can live with these effects or if you are ready to make a change.

Being sober curious means a bit more questioning of when, how much and why we drink. And a lot less of simply 'going along' with the dominant drinking culture that exists across social situations, often subconsciously or because we feel that it is socially expected of us.

What both have in common is that people who choose to go alcohol-free or drink in a more mindful way make the change to improve their physical and/or mental health.

## How to practice these lifestyles



### Recognise triggers for unhealthy habits

An awkward social situation? A bad day at a work? An event where you don't know anyone? If your immediate response is to have a drink, acknowledge this and replace with a healthier alternative the next time it happens.



### Remember that the choice to drink – or not – is yours alone

Everyone has a different motivation for drinking alcohol and the same is true for not drinking. Many of us will be familiar with having to give multiple reasons (or make up excuses) for not drinking on a night out. Be empowered that this a decision only you can make for yourself and others should accept that.



### Reframe your perception of alcohol-free

Instead of thinking you'll be missing out by not drinking, think about all the positive things you will gain. By choosing a soft drink in place of your usual spirit, you'll have more energy to get up and out the next day and more motivation to do what you had planned.

If you are experiencing alcohol-related issues, always consult your GP before taking steps to cut down or cut out alcohol.

# Tips for mindful drinking

Drinking less or cutting out alcohol can be achieved by making small, positive changes that can work for you. Being more mindful about the way you drink is a great place to start. If you slip up and drink more than you intended on a night out, that's okay. Take time to reflect on your reason for cutting down and all the benefits this will bring to your life and try again. Here are some tips to help you to drink within the low-risk weekly guidelines.



## Measure

Use a measure for spirits or wine when drinking at home. Never free-pour - this can make it almost impossible to know how much you are drinking.

Order a free measure cup at [www.drinkaware.ie](http://www.drinkaware.ie)

## Alternate

Alternate each drink with a glass of water to reduce the dehydration associated with alcohol. Keep a jug of water on the table to make this easier.



## Downsize

Downsize your drink by serving in a smaller glass. This can make all the difference, especially for wine as these glasses are bigger than ever.



## Make the swap

Stock up on non-alcoholic alternatives. There are so many low and no-alcohol wines, spirits and beers to take advantage of, so it's a great time to make the swap.



## Avoid top ups

Avoid topping up glasses. Finish one drink before pouring another to make it easier to track how much you're drinking over time.



## No-alcohol options

Have a no-alcohol drink instead of your usual. There are lots of low and no-alcohol beers, wines and spirits to choose from so it's a good time to make the swap.



## Break habits

Break your habits at home. If your normal night in includes a drink in front of the TV, consider doing something different like going for a walk, calling a friend or checking in with a neighbour.



## Stay out of rounds

Stay out of rounds – you may end up drinking more than you intended as you are more likely to drink at the pace of the fastest person in the group. If you can't, opt for a non-alcoholic drink instead.



# When should I not drink alcohol?



If you are pregnant



When caring for children



Before or while driving, cycling or scooting



When operating machinery



Before or during swimming



Always seek advice from your GP before drinking if you have a medical condition that may be worsened by alcohol or if you are on certain medication.

## Alternatives to alcohol:

Replacing alcohol with something else such as exercise, meditation or entertainment will make it far easier to live an alcohol-free life. It's a great way you can make a positive change to your lifestyle and incorporate relaxing, healthy and fun routines into your day.

Here are some things you can do:

- ✓ Ride a bicycle.
- ✓ Go for a walk – take a new route!
- ✓ Read a book.
- ✓ Catch up on household tasks, like laundry or food shopping.
- ✓ Start a journal – write down why you want to take a break from drinking alcohol.
- ✓ Listen to podcasts – there are plenty out there for meditation, cooking, entertainment, etc.
- ✓ Try a new no-alcohol drink.
- ✓ Meet a friend for a coffee.
- ✓ Play a board game.
- ✓ Watch your favourite TV shows or movies.
- ✓ Pick up a new hobby through online tutorials or classes – crocheting, painting, baking, etc.
- ✓ Run yourself a hot bath.

## Healthy drink Alternatives to alcohol:



Alcohol-Free



Kombucha



Mocktails



Iced Teas



Sparkling Juices

# Drink driving in Ireland

Alcohol is a factor in 38% of all fatal collisions on Irish roads. At Drinkaware, we strongly support official guidance from the Road Safety Authority and An Garda Síochána that any amount of alcohol will impair your ability to drive - a fact with which our research shows 87% of Irish adults agree.<sup>15</sup>

## When is it safe to drive the next day?

It takes **at least** one hour to process one standard drink. This is a guide for information purposes only. There are many factors that will affect this time including age, gender, weight, alcohol strength, the speed of your metabolism and the number of drinks consumed.

There is nothing you can do to remove alcohol from your body any quicker, only time. Common myths are that drinking coffee, having a shower, eating a large breakfast or going for a run will speed up the process. However, these are simply not true.

After you stop drinking, the alcohol levels in your system can continue to rise for up to 3 hours. If you feel unsure that you are able to drive safely, wait or use alternative transport options.

Driver Category	Blood Alcohol Concentration	Current Penalty
Learner, Novice, Professional	20+ to 80mg	€200 fine 3 month driving ban
Ordinary driver	50+ to 80mg	€200 fine 3 month driving ban
Ordinary driver	80+ to 100mg	€400 fine 6 month driving ban

## Help to make our roads safe

- « Make the choice to never drink and drive
- « Plan ahead – book a taxi or check public transport timetables
- « Don't let friends or family drink and drive
- « Never accept a lift from a driver who has consumed alcohol
- « If you are drinking in a group, choose a designated driver
- « Plan ahead if you are driving the morning after a night when you've been drinking

# How Drinkaware can help

Here are some of the ways we can help you to understand your drinking habits, make small changes to cut down or cut out alcohol and protect your health and wellbeing.

## Order our resources

Each year, we proudly distribute thousands of evidence-informed health promotion resources to households, hospitals, schools, youth centres, GP clinics and community groups across Ireland. Our health promotion resources are intended for adults only.



## Get the Facts Pack

Contains: Alcohol and You and Alcohol and Your Mental Health booklets, standard drink measure cup and drinks calculator wheel.

## Parents' Pack

Contains: Get the Facts pack plus our Your Children and Alcohol and Young People, Alcohol and Mental Health booklets.

## Book a workshop

We facilitate evidence-informed health promotion workshops in community, education and workplace settings nationwide. Our interactive workshops cover topics relating to parents, health and workplace wellness.

## Check out our website

We regularly update our website with new helpful content to support the Irish public's understanding of alcohol, and enable positive attitude and behaviour change.

Get in touch to book: [info@drinkaware.ie](mailto:info@drinkaware.ie)



# 92%

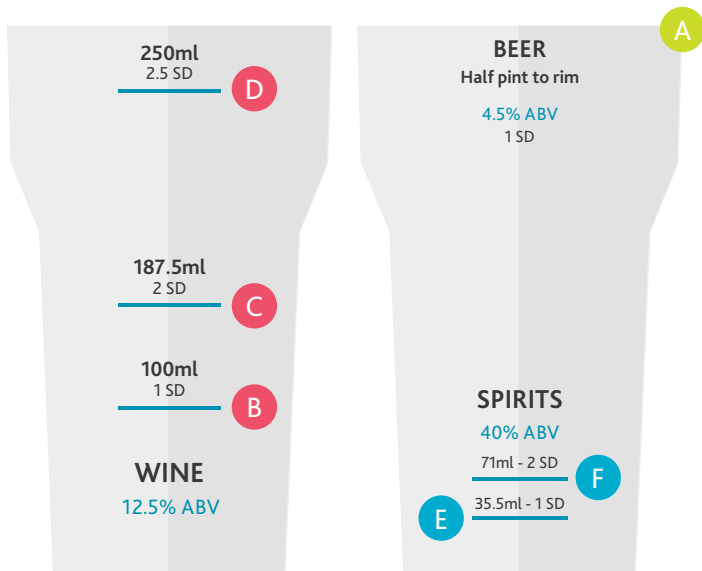
of people who have used our resources agree that they will help them to drink less



# How to use our resources

## Measure cup

Our standard drink measure cup makes it easier to understand how much you're really drinking at home. It features markings for spirits, wine and beer. The total volume of the cup is a half pint.



## Beer

- A. Half Pint  
(1 Standard drink)

## Wine

- B. 100ml  
(1 Standard drink)
- C. 187.5ml e.g. 1/4 bottle sold in pubs  
(2 Standard drinks)
- D. 250ml  
(2.5 Standard drinks)

## Spirits

- E. 35.5ml e.g. pub measure  
(1 Standard drink)
- F. 71ml  
(2 Standard drinks)

## Drinks calculator wheel

Our calculator show the number of standard drinks, and the calorie, sugar and alcohol content of different drinks.

- « Turn the inner wheel to point the arrow at one of the drinks listed.
- « The blue arrow shows standard drinks and calories. The green arrow shows grams of alcohol and sugar.
- « You can see the totals for 1-4 servings of the drink.

## Online drinks calculator

Use our online drinks calculator to find out the impact of your weekly drinking habits. Results show standard drinks, sugar, calories, cost, estimated time it takes to process the alcohol (for information purposes only). You will also see if you are drinking more than the low-risk weekly guidelines.

# Your weekly planner

Setting goals for your week ahead is a good habit to get into. If you don't stick to your goal this week, you can clearly see any barriers and make a new plan for next time.

The first row is filled in as an example. You can also download at [drinkaware.ie](http://drinkaware.ie).

My goal: This week, I plan to have no more than \_\_\_\_ drinks and \_\_\_\_ alcohol-free days.

	I plan to drink	# Standard drinks	Reason for drinking	Plan to keep on track	I actually consumed	Reached goal?	Comments
Example	2 pints of lager 1 gin + tonic	2 pints = 4 1 gin = 1	John's birthday party	Alternate each drink with water	2 pints of lager 2 gin + tonics	No	I was included in a round
Monday							
Tuesday							
Wednesday							
Thursday							
Friday							
Saturday							
Sunday							



## Need support?

If you are concerned about your own or a loved one's alcohol use, there are dedicated information and services available across the country.

### Drinkaware Support Hub

Drinkaware's online support hub has details of national support services. **Visit:** [www.drinkaware.ie/support-services](http://www.drinkaware.ie/support-services)

### HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline

This is a free and confidential, active listening helpline and email support service offering non-directive support, information, guidance and referral to anyone with a question or concern related to substance use.

**Call: 1800 459 459 or Email: [helpline@hse.ie](mailto:helpline@hse.ie)**

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# DRINKAWARE

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Scan the QR code for  
the drinks calculator  
to learn more

