

COVID-19: Safe alcohol limits after Lockdown

With recent Government announcements and easing of lockdown measures to include the re-opening of pubs, restaurants and cafés in England from 4th July; it is important to consider how lockdown may have affected our drinking habits, our alcohol tolerance and some of the ways in which we can safely enjoy a drink whilst socialising after lockdown.

How has lockdown changed our drinking habits?

Several surveys have highlighted the disruption coronavirus has made to our drinking habits. At the beginning of the crisis, we saw media coverage of people rushing to supermarkets to stock up on alcohol. We also heard that the Government had permitted 'off-licences and licenced shops selling alcohol' to stay open even once pubs and clubs closed their doors. Recent sales data have shown that sales of alcohol rose sharply during that time.

Many experts were worried drinking would drastically increase, along with many of its harmful consequences. These include greater risk of mental health problems, family conflict/violence, and alcohol dependence.

Data from several sources confirmed drinking habits changed during lockdown. New research commissioned by charity Alcohol Change UK has found that more than one in five (21%) adults who drink alcohol are drinking more often since lockdown began on 23 March. But one in three of those who drink (35%) have reduced how often they drink or stopped drinking altogether.

The representative survey of more than 2,000 people suggests that lockdown is changing the way that the UK drinks at both ends of the scale, with 6% of people surveyed (who have previously drunk alcohol) choosing to abstain from alcohol entirely for the lockdown.

These figures suggest that 8.6 million adults in the UK are drinking more frequently since lockdown, while 14 million are drinking less often or have stopped drinking entirely.

Your alcohol tolerance may have changed

Changes in the amount you drink can affect your alcohol tolerance. How intoxicated you feel is related to your tolerance, whereas your blood alcohol concentration is more related to how much you have drunk over a certain time period.

This means if you've been drinking more during lockdown, your tolerance has probably increased. You would need to consume more alcohol to feel the effects you used to get from fewer drinks. If you feel less of the effects of alcohol, you might drink more without realising it.

While you might not feel as drunk, your brain function is still affected and you can still be over the legal limit for driving. Take care to monitor the number of drinks you are consuming and plan how you'll get home without driving.

Higher tolerance to alcohol means you are also at increased risk of alcohol-related harm. Higher tolerance is associated with alcohol-use disorders and is one of the first signs of dependence.

On the other hand, if you have been drinking less, your tolerance may have decreased so a smaller amount of alcohol will affect you more than normal. This means if you drink the same amount as usual you might get drunk more quickly.

Monitor how you feel, and if your tolerance has decreased take it slowly or you might end up a lot drunker than you planned.

How much is too much?

Knowing your units will help you stay in control of your drinking. To keep health risks from alcohol to a low level if you drink most weeks:

- Men and Women are advised not to drink more than 14 units a week on a regular basis
- Spread your drinking over 3 or more days if you regularly drink as much as 14 units a week
- If you want to cut down, try to have several alcohol-free days each week
- Pregnant women are advised not to drink alcohol at all.

Fourteen units is equivalent to 6 pints of average-strength beer or 10 small glasses of low-strength wine.

How to avoid drinking too much

Sensible drinking means knowing what your limits are and being aware of how much you're drinking. Simply put, sensible drinking means not drinking alcohol to excess. To help avoid unintentionally drinking more than you planned, keep in mind these simple tips:

- **Set limits and count your drinks** - Before you start drinking, decide how much you want to drink and stick to it. Men and Women are advised not to drink more than 14 units a week on a regular basis. If you have an existing health problem, alcohol affects you more so you should drink even less. If you are under 18 or pregnant, you shouldn't drink at all.
- **Alternate your drinks with water and sip slowly** - Have at least one glass of water or a no sugar, non-alcoholic drink for every alcoholic drink. It will help slow you down and can also reduce the likelihood of a nasty hangover the next day. Avoid shots or buying rounds, so you can comfortably sit with your drink and sip them slowly.
- **Eat before and during drinking** - This will help slow your drinking down and also slows the absorption of alcohol. You'll be better able to monitor how much you are drinking, so you are less likely to overindulge.
- **Consider drinking low-alcohol beers** - or at least do not drink strong beers or lagers.
- **Don't stock up on alcohol** - having alcohol at home may make it more likely that you'll have a drink. Try only buying alcohol when you plan to drink it.
- **It may be worth reviewing your entire social routine when the lockdown is lifted fully** - For example, consider:
 - cutting back on types of social activity which would usually involve you drinking.
 - trying different social activities where drinking is not involved.
 - reducing the number of days in the week where you go out to drink.
 - going out to pubs or clubs later in the evening.
- **Try to resist any peer pressure** – particularly from people who may encourage you to drink more than you really want to.

How to have a good time whilst maintaining social distancing

While you might be itching for things to get back to normal, we are still socially distancing whilst out in public. Make sure you are aware of the Government guidelines and restrictions in your area.

Remember your favourite pubs and restaurants have to follow strict rules, so respect the staff and the new practices they have put in place to keep everyone safe. Ask before merging tables, respect capacity limits, sign in with your name and phone number when requested, and use hand sanitiser if offered on arrival.

When out drinking, don't share drinks and continue to follow COVID-related rules and guidelines such as:

- Keep at least **1 metre+ away** from each other (2 metre minimum where possible)
- **Don't touch** your eyes, nose or mouth
- Maintain good hygiene practices such as regular **hand-washing**

Information Sources –

If you would like to access this information in more detail please follow the links below –

<https://theconversation.com/getting-back-on-the-beers-after-lockdown-heres-what-you-should-know-140454>

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<https://alcoholchange.org.uk/blog/2020/covid19-drinking-during-lockdown-headline-findings>

<https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/files.alcoholchange.org.uk/images/Drinking-in-lockdown-press-release-final.pdf?mtime=20200415181333>

Useful Links for more Information:

www.carefirst-lifestyle.co.uk

www.drinkaware.co.uk

<https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/understand-your-drinking/unit-calculator>

www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

www.nhs.uk

If you feel you may need some support, you can contact Care first. Care first is a leading provider of confidential, professional counselling, information and advice services. All employees are eligible to use Care first, our services include; telephone counselling, information services and online support. Call Care first on the Freephone number provided by your organisation and you can speak to a professional in confidence.

If you would like to view the Webinar on '**Alcohol: Safe alcohol limits after lockdown**' this is being delivered live on Wednesday 8th July at 12pm-12.30pm, please use the below link to register for this session -

<https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/8088254232313951500>

If you are unable to join the webinar live, a recording of the session can be accessed using the same link above after the webinar has taken place.