

Coping with drinking habits during the pandemic

James is working from home due to COVID 19 and finding he is drinking more than usual. He told us:

‘It is so easy to have a drink with lunch and then one in the evening and before you know it you have a big problem.’



Our bodies relationship with alcohol?

Alcohol is high in calories and contains no nutrients. Drinking alcohol affects our nervous system - too much can leave us feeling sluggish and low in energy.

Alcohol also lowers our immune system which can lead to infections, kidney and liver damage. During this viral pandemic we need our immunity at its best.

Our bodies processes alcohol calories differently - when we consume alcohol as part of our normal diet, the calories from the alcohol are consumed first, whilst the food is stored as fat.

If we reduce our food intake to compensate for alcohol consumed, we are at risk of poor nutrition as alcohol does not contain vitamins, minerals, proteins or other necessary nutrients for our body to function properly.

Drinking too much alcohol can lead to careless behaviour and may lead to forgetting to follow the simple safety measures of washing hands and not touching our face or getting too close to others.

The NHS guidance is that we should not consume more than 14 units a week. What does this mean?

- 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 drink-free days each week

Fourteen units is equivalent to 6 pints of average-strength beer or 10 small glasses of low-strength wine. (source: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/alcohol-misuse/>)

Should I be concerned?

For many of us the changes may be relatively new and feel small, but it does not take long to form habits and these habits may start to have an effect on us.



Short-term effects

- Slower reactions and responses
- Drunkenness, hangover, dehydration, impotence
- Lower blood sugar levels leading to tiredness, irritability and fainting
- Vitamin B deficiency
- Loss of sleep so do not feel fully rested which can lead to irritability and frustration
- Lower blood pressure

Long-term effects

- Weight gain and obesity
- Increased risk of developing cancer of throat, mouth, stomach and lungs
- Damage to heart, liver, brain, stomach, and social relations
- Pneumonia
- Can cause depression as alcohol lowers our mood and causes agitation
- High blood pressure

Stages of change - There are six stages to change:

1. **Not being interested** in making changes in behaviour
2. **Thinking about making changes** in behaviour
3. **Preparing for change** - planning and preparation for change
4. **Action** - action the change
5. **Continuing the action** - maintaining changes in behaviour
6. **Relapse** - back to old behaviours, a stage to avoid



Stages of change example: James' Story

Uncertain about change

In pre COVID times James was too busy getting on with his life - work, home, family. James find himself furloughed due to COVID 19 and spends more time pottering at home and enjoying time with his family. He is not thinking about diet, alcohol, or exercise.

Considering change

After a few weeks James begins to consider that he is putting on weight and drinking more alcohol and not doing any exercise. He realises that he needs to change things and may need support to do this.

Preparing for change

James is preparing to make some changes to his lifestyle. He has stopped buying what he sees as comfort food, opting for healthy options and starts to reduce the amount of alcohol he is buying. He has decided to swop out the lunchtime drink and is going to experiment with some mocktails for him and his family.

Action

James is now cooking healthy meals following the Eatwell plate guidance ([click here](#)) and enjoying the improved taste, he has found that he does not miss the alcoholic drink with his lunch. He feels really motivated by this.

He is also taking regular walks with his family each day. All of which is giving him a sense of pride for what he has achieved so far, and he is enjoying these activities.

Continuing the action

James is feeling more energised and enjoying working on these changes as it is making him feel less worried and anxious, and he is finding he is not getting so bored with staying at home. He is also more involved and relaxed in these uncertain times of COVID.

Relapse

The COVID 19 furlough period has finished and James has stopped cooking nutritious meals, he is feeling more stressed and has increase his alcohol intake. He feels he has failed.

Planning and Motivation for change

The better you plan for change the more successful you are likely to be in making changes. Developing a plan can take time but if you plan well and think of all of the things that can help you to make the change, as well as the things that may stop you making the change, then you are more likely to achieve the change. **Remember to stay SMART.**

Goals need to be:

- **Specific** - This will help you to focus your efforts, they need to be clearly defined - what are you going to do?
- **Measurable** - How will you be able to measure the progress, be specific *'I want to cut down my alcohol intake by a 1/3 before next month.'*
- **Achievable** - Know you are capable of reaching the goal so that you do not lose interest.
- **Realistic** - To ensure you maintain your motivation.
- **Timely** - Set a timescale for the goal.



Where is your motivation?

Two more questions to yourself **'What is your motivation for making the change?'**

On a scale of 1 (chance of making the change low) to 10 (chance of making the change high)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Remember if your motivation is less than 5, you will need to find ways to increase this. You can do this by asking yourself **'how important is this change to me?'** Example: 'If I feel less anxious, I will enjoy playing with the kids more.'

When a change is important to you it is easier, and the second check is our confidence: **'How confident am I to make this change?'**

What stops us from making changes is being afraid to fail. **'What if I fail and go back to my old habits?'** This is why you need to start in small steps and build up.

If you feel you need support to change your drinking habits here are some organisations who can support you:

- [Alcohol Misuse - NHS](#)
- [Alcohol and Mental Health - Mental Health Foundation](#)
- [Alcoholics Anonymous](#)
- [Al-Anon - support for families and friends of problem drinkers](#)
- [FRANK](#)
- [SMART alcohol support in Wokingham](#)

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www.healthwatchwokingham.co.uk