

Reviewed May 2009

Alcohol and diabetes

Many people enjoy drinking alcohol, whether it is a glass of wine with a meal, a celebratory glass of champagne or a pint with friends at the pub. The good news is that there is no need to give up alcohol just because you have diabetes. We recommend no more than 2 units per day for women and 3 units per day for men. The aim of this leaflet is to provide you with general guidance about the effects of alcohol and how to drink sensibly if you have diabetes.

What is a unit?

Over the years the alcohol content of most drinks has gone up. A drink can now contain more units than you think – a pint of premium lager can contain as much as 3 units and a small glass of wine (175ml) around 2 units.

One unit is approximately:

- ½ pint of ordinary strength beer, lager or cider
- 1 pub measure (50 ml) of sherry or vermouth
- 1 pub measure of spirit (25 ml), eg gin, vodka or whisky.

To work out accurately the number of units in your drink, the following equation can be applied:

(Note: ABV = alcohol by volume)

$$\frac{\text{ABV} \times \text{volume}}{1000} = \text{number of units}$$

For example, by using the above equation we can calculate that a pint of lager (568 ml), which has the alcoholic strength of 5.2 % ABV, will contain 3 units.

$$\frac{5.2 \times 568}{1000} = 2.95 \text{ (ie 3 units).}$$

Hypoglycaemia

- Alcohol makes hypoglycaemia (low blood glucose levels) more likely to occur. However, as long as your diabetes is well controlled, moderate amounts of alcohol in line with the above daily guidelines can be drunk shortly before, during or soon after a meal without affecting short-term blood glucose control.
- Never drink on an empty stomach as the alcohol will be absorbed too quickly into your bloodstream. If you are drinking throughout the evening snack on something starchy like breadsticks or crisps.
- Do not substitute alcoholic drinks for your usual meal or snacks as this may lead to a hypo (hypoglycaemia).
- Serious hypoglycaemia can occur with larger quantities of alcohol, particularly if you are treated with insulin and especially if too little carbohydrate is eaten. If this could apply to you, always make sure you take some carbohydrate before going to bed after drinking. Useful snacks include toast, cereal and sandwiches, although chips or pizza on the way home may be an easier, albeit unhealthier, option.



- The liver gets rid of alcohol at the rate of about 1 unit per hour but this can vary. If you drink more than a few units in the evening you will have an increased risk of hypos that may occur up to 16 hours after heavy drinking. It is vital you keep your blood glucose levels topped up with carbohydrate and always remember to eat something at breakfast time. Monitor your blood glucose levels closely.
- Remember that you, or those with you, may be less aware of your hypo symptoms when you are drinking so always wear some form of diabetes identification. A hypo can be confused with drunkenness when there is the smell of alcohol on your breath.

Your health

- Continuous heavy drinking can lead to raised blood pressure so again try to limit your intake.
- All types of alcoholic drinks contain calories so if you are watching your weight think about cutting back further.
- If you have neuropathy (nerve damage), drinking alcohol can make it worse and increase the pain, tingling, numbness and other symptoms associated with nerve damage.
- Moderate alcohol consumption, in line with recommended daily guidelines, can be beneficial for your heart. Wine, especially red wine, may offer greater benefit than spirits or beer. However, there is currently insufficient evidence to suggest that you should take up drinking if you are currently 'tee total'.

Be aware

- You should avoid low sugar (sometimes called 'diabetic') beers and cider. Although they contain less sugar than standard, their alcohol content is higher. As little as one pint of a low sugar beer can bring your blood alcohol level above the legal limit.
- Low alcohol wines are often higher in sugar than ordinary ones, so if you do choose these, just stick to a glass or two.
- Drinks with a high sugar content, eg sweet sheries, sweet wines and most liqueurs should be limited.
- Mixer drinks should be 'diet' or 'sugar-free' such as diet tonic water and diet cola.
- Never drink and drive.
- High blood glucose levels, even if there are ketones present, will not affect a breathalyser machine.

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For support on any aspect of diabetes please call Diabetes UK Careline: 0845 120 2960 (charged at local rate). A translation service is available. Open Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm.

We welcome feedback on this or any of our information. Please email: infofeedback@diabetes.org.uk