



**IRISH HEART
FOUNDATION**
Fighting Heart Disease & Stroke

**Your heart
can't drink
like you can**



**SAY 'WHEN'
SOONER**

Alcohol, Calories
and Weight

How Much is Too Much?

Try our Drink Diary

Social Drinking Vs
Dependant Drinking

Alcohol: The
Forgotten Risk



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www.irishheart.ie
#SayWhenSooner



The Irish Heart Foundation is the national charity fighting heart disease and stroke.

We support, educate and train people to save lives, campaign for patients, promote positive health strategies, fund research and provide vital public information.

We need your support – through donations, as a volunteer or on our training courses.

Registered Charity Number: CHY 5507

WHAT IS CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE?

Cardiovascular disease is a broad term to describe many diseases that can affect the cardiovascular (heart and blood vessel) system, including diseases of the heart valves, of the heart muscle, of the arteries and of the veins. By far the most common type of disease in the system occurs as a result of hardening of the arteries, 'atherosclerosis', which most often leads to a heart attack and a brain attack or stroke.

Drinking too much alcohol can increase blood pressure, weight, risk of stroke, and lead to certain heart conditions.

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SAY 'WHEN' SOONER

When it comes to alcohol, you may hear different messages about whether it is good or bad for the heart. You may also wonder 'how much is too much?' What are the maximum recommended levels we should consume? What is a standard drink? Should you Say 'When' Sooner?

This magazine will give you the lowdown on alcohol, heart disease and stroke, explain how much is too much and discuss the tricky topic of alcohol, calories and weight. The people in our case studies share their revealing stories of how alcohol affected them and provide insight into the changes they have made to their lifestyle.

Alcohol is often the forgotten risk. A cardiac rehab nurse describes how she discusses this issue with her patients. The important topic of how and when social drinking becomes a dependency is discussed by an addiction psychiatrist. Check out our handy drink diary to see how much alcohol you are drinking.

We hope you find the information in this magazine helpful and that it will encourage you to Say 'When' Sooner.

Dr Angie Brown, medical director of the Irish Heart Foundation and consultant cardiologist



IRISH DRINKING HABITS

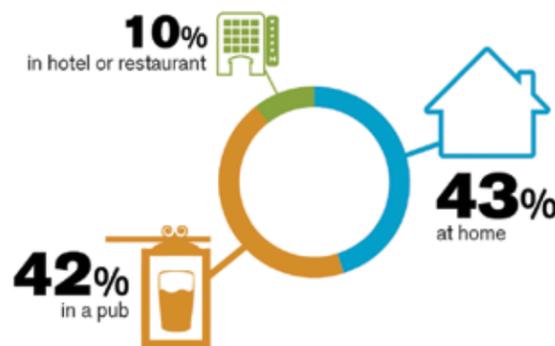
IRISH DRINKING



HARM FROM OUR DRINKING



WHERE WE DRINK



WHAT WE DRINK



The lowdown on alcohol, heart disease and stroke



Dr Angie Brown, medical director of the Irish Heart Foundation and consultant cardiologist, explains how alcohol affects heart health.

Alcohol and the heart

“Many people don’t realise that alcohol can damage the heart. While small quantities of alcohol are considered low risk for health and your heart, drinking more than the recommended maximum levels of alcohol increases your risk of high blood pressure and stroke.

Higher quantities increase your risk of developing cardiac arrhythmias – heart conditions where there is an irregular heartbeat. High consumption of alcohol or high risk drinking, poses a particular risk of developing the condition known as atrial fibrillation. There is also an increased risk of developing an enlarged heart muscle (dilated cardiomyopathy). These conditions affect how efficiently the blood is pumped around the body and if they are not monitored and treated, they are likely to lead to more serious heart problems e.g. atrial fibrillation which can lead to a stroke.

Alcohol and the body

“Alcohol is a stimulant – the level that it acts as a stimulant varies from person to

person. In small amounts, it can work as a relaxant for some people to help them enjoy social outings.

“At high levels of consumption, it increases your blood pressure, increases your heart rate and long term, it can have effects on your brain and your memory. It increases your risk of stroke, can increase your risk of liver cirrhosis and ultimately liver failure. As alcohol is full of calories it increases your risk of obesity. People who drink excessively are also at risk of nutritional deficiencies such as vitamins like B12 and folate. Lack of these vitamins can lead to further damage to the liver, heart and nervous system.

“Drinking large amounts of alcohol may increase your risk of cancers such as breast cancer, liver cancer and oesophageal cancer. If you are pregnant, or trying to conceive it is advised that you should avoid drinking alcohol as it can also affect your baby”.

DID YOU KNOW?

Men who drink 6 standard drinks (60g) or more of alcohol a day have a four times increased risk of high blood pressure.

High blood pressure

“Once you start to drink too much alcohol, you begin to see an increase in the negative effects.

“Your blood pressure rises, your heart rate increases and the number of



calories that you’re consuming goes up. This increases the risk of obesity which can lead to a further rise in blood pressure. Your triglycerides, which are a type of fat in the blood, start to go up.”

“You can see quite dramatic changes when people abstain from or cut down significantly on their alcohol intake. Over time they lose weight and their blood pressure improves, sometimes resulting in being able to stop blood pressure medication.

“This is very positive as high blood pressure is a major risk for heart disease and stroke. However these changes should and often go hand in hand

with other lifestyle measures such as eating a healthier diet, cutting down on salt, being more physically active and stopping smoking.”

Stroke

“The risk of stroke, both ischaemic stroke (resulting from a blood clot in the brain) and haemorrhagic stroke (resulting from a weakened vessel that ruptures and bleeds into the surrounding brain), increases with excessive alcohol consumption – and to a greater degree with haemorrhagic stroke.”

“Once you’ve had a stroke, you have a higher risk of recurrence unfortunately, so it’s very important to manage all the risk factors, including alcohol consumption.

Irregular heart rate

“Irregular heart rates (cardiac arrhythmias) in certain situations are called ‘Holiday Heart’ because we see people, even young people, coming into hospital after a party when they’ve been drinking lots of alcohol. They may complain of palpitations, which sometimes is due to a fast irregular heart beat called atrial fibrillation.”

There is a danger with atrial fibrillation that because the blood isn’t being pumped around effectively, it is more likely to clot and that clot can be pumped out to the circulation around the body and cause a stroke.

“Usually with ‘Holiday Heart’, the irregular heart rate will settle down and hopefully won’t occur again. But if you’re regularly drinking beyond the recommended limits, then it’s more likely to be a recurrent problem.”

“Drinking large amounts of alcohol combined with caffeinated drinks is one area of concern in younger people who are coming in with heart palpitations.”



“One area of concern is younger people who are coming in with heart palpitations and we’re discovering that they’ve been drinking large amounts of alcohol combined with caffeinated drinks which act as a further stimulant. The combination of these can cause arrhythmias and therefore bring on palpitations possibly causing breathlessness and dizzy spells.

“In some cases, patients with rhythm disturbances who have abstained or cut down significantly on their alcohol intake improve and remain in a regular rhythm and can discontinue heart medication following medical advice.”

Cardiomyopathy – an enlarged heart

“Cardiomyopathy is a dilated or enlarged heart with impaired function. Instead of working normally, the heart becomes too big and doesn’t pump

DID YOU KNOW?

Women who drink 4 standard drinks (40g) or more a day, have an eight fold increased risk of haemorrhagic stroke.

blood round the body efficiently. “There are numerous causes of cardiomyopathy including hereditary causes, or due to previous heart attacks, cardiomyopathy can be exacerbated by alcohol. “But alcohol in large doses is directly toxic to the heart itself causing an alcoholic cardiomyopathy.”

Heart disease and heart attack

“The increase in blood pressure and triglycerides seen with excessive alcohol consumption are both risk factors for heart disease.

“It can be hard to tease out what exactly are the contributory factors for heart disease, especially as alcohol use is often accompanied by smoking, lack of physical activity, obesity and poor diet.” These are all important risk factors for heart disease.

Low risk drinking

Though there is a lot of on-going research in this area we need larger scale studies. Most studies so far, suggest that drinking within the recommended guidelines is low risk for heart health. “What I tell people is if you’d like a glass of wine that’s fine, as long as you keep it at the low levels and have some alcohol free days. But if you don’t drink alcohol, I don’t suggest you start drinking! There are safer and healthier ways to reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke, it is more important to be physically active, not smoke and have a healthy diet.

“Furthermore it is important to remember that some people may have been advised not to drink at all because of a medical condition, or because of certain medication they are taking so they need to follow that advice.”

(See pages 20–22 for more on lifestyle changes or go to www.irishheart.ie).



What is a heart attack?

A heart attack happens when the heart muscle is damaged due to a blockage in the heart's blood supply. This is caused by the build-up of fatty substance (atheroma or plaque) on the coronary artery wall which tears or breaks off causing a clot to form in the artery, blocking the blood supply to the heart muscle.

Heart attack symptoms

The most common symptom of a heart attack for men is chest pain. This is usually a crushing or tight pain, which may move to your jaw or arms, particularly on the left side. But not everyone experiences chest pain when having a heart attack and some have no chest pain at all or have other symptoms. For women heart attack symptoms are often more vague such as nausea, tiredness, shortness of breath, back pain or tightness in the jaw rather than the more classic chest pain.

The more common symptoms

- Chest pain
- Upper body pain in the jaw, back, neck or arms
- Shortness of breath
- Sweating
- Nausea
- Light-headedness
- Loss of consciousness
- Weakness
- Tiredness

Not all the above symptoms are always present. Don't delay, get help fast. Call 999 at the first sign of a heart attack.

How John Healy looks after his Heart

When Ireland's best known TV Maitre D', John Healy speaks about his life today, the word 'balance' comes up a lot – whether it's achieving better work life balance or finding equilibrium through yoga.

John, who is a familiar face from RTE's TV show *The Restaurant*, says his life used to be much more chaotic. He worked long hours as a Maitre D' in some of Dublin's and London's top restaurants.

A busy lifestyle

"It was relentless – it really was. My job consumed my life and I was at work all the time. To create a peaceful relaxing environment for customers, it meant a lot of work and responsibility behind the scenes and it could be highly stressful at times."

Looking back, John thinks that the stressful situation influenced lots of areas of his life – whether it was having a few drinks to unwind at the end of the day, smoking, skipping meals or not taking enough time for himself.

"I thought I was living a healthy life but I never really ate properly – I ate standing up and really ate as little as possible. I drank copious amounts of coffee and I smoked, and up to a certain point in my life I drank far too much alcohol."

From heart attack to heart transplant

John had two heart attacks by the age of 45, the second of which led to heart failure and he underwent a heart transplant two and a half years ago.

It was while he was on the waiting list for his transplant that John really started to think about the lifestyle he'd had and the changes he wanted to make.

Making changes

He had already given up alcohol in 2001 as he was using it to escape his problems and it was affecting his health. He stopped smoking after his second heart attack. It wasn't an easy task as John had smoked since he was a teenager but he knew that it was something he had to do for the sake of his health.

"I was 18 months waiting for the heart transplant and it was a great opportunity for me to calm down and start really taking care of myself. I learnt a lot about meditation. I also learnt to say no to things, whereas before I'd just try and do everything."

"I thought I was living a healthy life but I never really ate properly – I ate standing up and really ate as little as possible. I drank copious amounts of coffee and I smoked."

John now works as a restaurant consultant and is also working on a home cooking TV show. He focuses on having a good work life balance, keeping his work to four days a week.

After his heart transplant, John put on weight due to the steroids he needed to take. He attended a cardiac rehabilitation course (he had also attended courses after his heart attacks) and eased himself back into physical activity.

Balancing it all

"I find the best thing for me is that I walk an hour four times a week and I've been doing that since April of this year. I walk at a good pace and I find that it tones everything.

"I've also taken up yoga and I find it absolutely fantastic. The stretching alone is great for the muscles and I find the meditation part of it is very helpful. I'm someone who has a busy mind so slowing things down and learning to sit with myself is really beneficial."

John, who is 49, also follows a healthy diet – making sure he starts the day with porridge for breakfast and stocking up on foods like bananas, chicken salad, soup, grilled fish and vegetables during the day. One of his go-to meals is sesame coated chicken with red cabbage salad, a recipe that he contributed to the Irish Heart Foundation's *I Love Good Food* cookbook.

Stress comes into everyone's life but John feels he has a much better response to it now.

"When you've gone through something life threatening, you tend to stand back from things that happen and look at

them for what they really are. I don't do drama anymore and I realise that it isn't possible to control a lot of things in life.

"I think the biggest lesson I learned is that I needed to take better care of myself – I was always trying to look after everyone else and you can't really do that if you're not taking care of yourself."



Your heart can't drink like you can
SAY 'WHEN' SOONER

How much is too much?



When it comes to alcohol consumption, knowing exactly how much you're drinking and the maximum recommended levels, is vital explains Janis Morrissey, Dietitian, MINDI, with the Irish Heart Foundation.

As a nation, we are vastly underestimating our alcohol consumption. In a recent Health Research Board survey, 6,000 people were asked to classify their own drinking behaviour, around 2 per cent classified themselves as heavy drinkers, just under 40 per cent said they were moderate drinkers while 58 per cent said they were light drinkers.

But when the actual levels of alcohol consumed were totted up, it came out that more than half of drinkers were classified as harmful drinkers, (whose drinking causes harm to their own or other people's health) using the World Health Organisation's criteria.

And 75 per cent of alcohol consumed was done as part of a binge drinking session.

"There seems to be this real disconnect between people's perception of their drinking and reality," says Janis. "While there's no universal agreed definition of binge drinking, it's defined by the WHO as six standard drinks or more consumed on one occasion.

"That translates into three pints of beer. If you said to a guy that three pints of beer was binge drinking, he might be

more than a bit surprised. But that is what binge drinking is and getting the message across is about trying to shift a norm in society which is obviously no mean feat.

"This campaign will start that conversation."



What is a standard drink?

You may remember hearing about units of alcohol – but after a review a few years ago, Ireland now uses 'standard drink' as a measure of what we're drinking.

"For women, the recommended maximum limit is 11 standard drinks a week," says Janis. "For men, the recommended maximum limit is 17 standard drinks a week. They're maximum limits and not targets.

"There is no recognised safe level of alcohol consumption for a person – it's a range of low risk to high risk and the recommended maximum levels are at the low risk end.

A standard drink is a specific quantity, based on it containing 10 grams of alcohol. A pint of lager contains 20g of alcohol and would therefore be equal to two standard drinks. A large glass of wine could contain two or even three standard drinks. "People

A standard drink is a specific quantity, based on it containing 10 grams of alcohol.

sometimes don't realise how quickly they are adding up their standard drinks. For instance, some people use much bigger wine glasses now at home, in restaurants and pubs and the idea has crept in about having a glass while making dinner, having another glass with dinner and then finishing off the bottle.

"But a bottle of wine can contain 8 standard drinks. One bottle of wine would bring a woman well on the way to reaching the weekly maximum limit of 11 standard drinks and drinking it in one go is binge drinking."

Why the difference for women and men?

There is a biological reason to explain why there's a difference between the recommended number of standard drinks for men and women. Women's bodies process alcohol differently when drinking equal amounts of alcohol to men, which means women experience greater health risks from alcohol than men and the onset of alcohol-related health problems begins earlier.

Women absorb and metabolize alcohol differently than men. In general, women have less body water than men of a similar body weight, which results in higher concentrations of alcohol in the blood for women after drinking the same amount of

alcohol as men. Women also have smaller amounts of the enzymes that break down alcohol.

How can people keep better track of their alcohol consumption?

"Keeping a drink diary can be very useful. When it comes to people trying to lose weight, keeping track of what they're eating every day can really help and the same can apply with alcohol consumption.

"It helps to note down drinks for a week or two and then take that step back and think, **what** am I drinking, **when** am I drinking, **how much** am I drinking and **why** am I drinking? After reviewing this, you might find things you want to change or discover that certain situations are triggering your drinking."

See Page 12 for our handy drink diary.

FACT
We underestimate our alcohol intake by 61%.

TIPS FOR DRINKING LESS

Space out your alcohol over a week and keep at least three days alcohol free.

Buy a measure if you drink spirits at home so that you make sure you're not overfilling your glass.

Alternate alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks.

Try not to get into rounds or if it is your round, opt for a non-alcoholic drink.

Make sure you've eaten beforehand if you're having alcohol. It's better for your body to process alcohol with food as it lessens the effects of alcohol.



Pace yourself when drinking - take small sips and take time to savour the drink rather than consuming it quickly.

Think about drinking 'light' versions. In some cases, 'light' refers to lower calories but it can also mean it is lower in alcohol. Check the label or product website and choose drinks with the lowest 'alc. % vol.'

If you're at a party, think about consuming from your own bottle or can of alcohol. When you have a glass that's constantly being topped up, it's hard to keep track of how much you're drinking.

Buy smaller wine glasses. When it comes to weight management, use a smaller plate so that it looks full with a smaller amount of food. The same concept applies with wine glasses.

Switching to smaller glasses will mean you'll consume closer to the standard drink size and you will still look generous to your guests.



Alcohol, calories and weight

We're more likely to think about how many calories we're eating through food but do you know how many calories you're taking in through alcohol? **Janis Morrissey, Dietitian, MINDI, with the Irish Heart Foundation, discusses the calories in alcohol and how alcohol can lead to weight gain in other ways.**

Alcohol is empty calories

"Alcohol provides a lot of calories but very little nourishment. It doesn't fill you up – but if you ate the equivalent calories in food, you would probably feel really full."

Burning calories

Alcohol can also reduce the amount of fat calories that you burn

"The body has an order in the way that it digests and processes nutrients. If you consume alcohol, your body processes that first. It doesn't store the alcohol – it stores fat, carbohydrate and protein to process them later – but it processes alcohol first of all.

"So the alcohol is broken down long before any fat is used up."

Should you drink alcohol if you're trying to lose weight?

"If you are trying to lose weight at least for the initial stage, you should cut out alcohol completely. It's for a number of reasons – the empty calories, the fact that it reduces your body's ability to burn fat and also that it can stimulate your appetite.

"Alcohol can act as a relaxant and you become less inhibited. The willpower that you have to follow a healthy eating plan can go out the window as you suddenly decide you will

have that dessert or stop off at the takeaway on the way home from the pub.

"If you're drinking quite a bit, you'll soon lose track of the calories you're taking in through snacks or fast food. Then of course the next day, you might decide that you need a fry or some salty food or soft drinks to deal with the effects of a hangover."

How many calories should we be consuming?

"A ballpark figure for women is 2,000 calories a day and for men is 2,500 calories a day. It depends on activity levels and other factors but that's a general guide."

How many calories are in alcohol?

"There are 7 calories in a gram of alcohol so it's second only to fat in terms of being a very concentrated source of calories – fat has 9 calories per gram. That may sound low in its own right but it's quite a concentrated source of calories in a small volume.

"Pure alcohol isn't the only ingredient in an alcoholic drink – when for example sugar, wheat, barley or grapes are added, in different forms of alcoholic drinks, it means each will have a different calorie amount."

So a standard drink contains between 100-150 calories once you bear in mind the calories from other ingredients – not just the pure alcohol calories.

CALCULATE YOUR CALORIES FROM ALCOHOL

Unlike food products, alcoholic drinks aren't required to provide any information to consumers on the number of calories or any other ingredients they contain.

A useful website is www.drinkhelp.ie – it has a drink calculator that can compare your alcohol intake to the recommendations and also tell you how many calories you've consumed and the food equivalent.



www.drinkhelp.ie

TIPS IF YOU'RE WATCHING YOUR WEIGHT

♥ Try diet drinks or diluting with water or a white wine spritzer.

♥ Try not to serve snacks when you're drinking at home. Make sure you've already eaten a healthy meal so that you're less likely to go for fatty or salty snacks.

♥ With alcohol, you can sometimes become dehydrated and can confuse that for hunger. Alternate water with alcoholic drinks to keep hydrated.

♥ Think about the amount of time it would take to burn off the calories in your drink. The 200 calories in a pint of lager matches the amount of

calories in a bar of chocolate, an ice cream or a bag of crisps.

To burn this off, you would need to:

- > Walk for 50 mins
- > Swim for 30 mins
- > Dance for 35 mins
- > Play golf for 80 mins
- > Do aerobics for 32 mins

Are there any drinks that are particularly high in calories?

"Drinks that are mixed together like cocktails tend to be high in calories but can be difficult to work out – both in terms of the alcohol content and the calorie content. What kind of mixer is used, is there a juice, a liqueur, a cream?"

"With cocktails it's virtually impossible

to work out the calorie or alcohol content as they can be prepared very differently in various bars and there's such a huge variety of different ingredients mixed together. And serving sizes can be quite large."

How alcohol can cause weight gain

If a man drinks up to 17 standard drinks a week, that's 1,700 calories just from alcohol. This can lead to weight

gain of about one and a half stone a year.

For women, 11 standard drinks a week is 1100 calories a week and this can translate to gaining a stone in a year.

That's at the lower end of the scale so someone drinking way beyond the recommended limits would be consuming more calories.

How many calories do you drink?

Beer/Ale/Stout (330ml bottle)

1 standard drink is 140 Calories, equal to a **half portion of chips**

Alcopop (Long neck bottle 275ml)

1 standard drink is 190 Calories, equal to 1 **ring doughnut**

Beer/Ale/Stout (Pint 568ml)

2 standard drinks is 210 Calories, equal to 1 **packet of crisps**

Wine (Quarter bottle 187.5ml)

2 standard drinks is 138 Calories, equal to a **half bar of chocolate**

Strong Beer (Pint 568ml)

2 standard drinks is 210 Calories, equal to 2 **scoops of vanilla ice-cream**

Wine (Bottle 750ml)

8 standard drinks is 550 calories, equal to a **cheese burger and small portion of chips**

Cider (Pint 568ml)

2 standard drinks is 230 Calories, equal to 1 **slice of fruit cake**

Pub Measure (35.5ml)

1 standard drink is 60 Calories, equal to 2 **tablespoons of cream**

Drink Diary

How much alcohol are you drinking? Try keeping a drink diary for a week to find out.

Why keep a drink diary?

- Keeping a record can help you to find out how much alcohol you're drinking and to identify areas that you might like to change.
- It can help you to keep track of any changes you've made and identify areas of success.
- Being aware of the circumstances in which you drink alcohol can help you realise trigger situations where you may drink more than the recommended amount.

Top tips on keeping a drink diary

Aim to keep the diary for a full week and try to include both weekdays and a weekend as your drinking pattern may vary.

If you're not sure about the number of standard drinks in a drink, try and choose one from page 13 that seems close to it rather than leaving it out altogether.

Be as specific as possible about the quantity of drink consumed.

Add up the total number of standard drinks for each day and the total for the week. How does your weekly total compare to the recommendations?

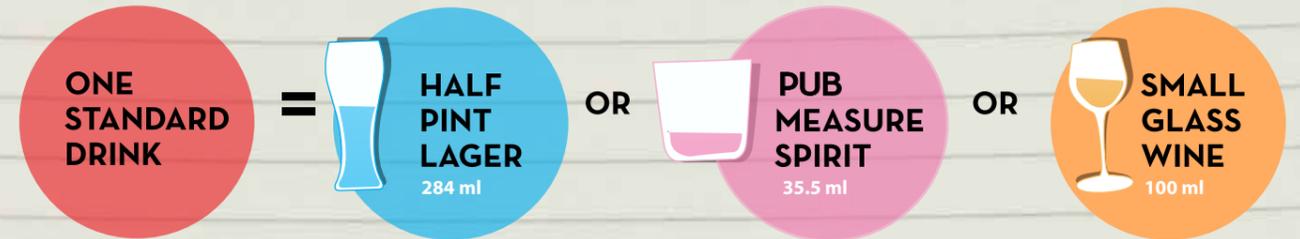
Your heart can't drink like you can

SAY 'WHEN' SOONER

How much is one standard drink?

A standard drink is a measure of alcohol. The number of standard drinks is based on the size of the drink and its alcohol strength.

The alcohol content or the alcoholic strength of a drink is shown on the label as alcohol by volume (%ABV). A 5% ABV means 5 parts alcohol to 95 parts water. 1 standard drink contains 10 grams of pure alcohol.



Some drinks are more than one standard drink.

1.3 Standard Drinks	1.9 Standard Drinks	7.5 Standard Drinks
Medium glass of wine (125ml, ABV 12.5%)	Quarter bottle of wine (187.5ml, ABV 12.5%)	Bottle of wine (750ml, ABV 12.5%)
1.1 Standard Drinks	2 Standard Drinks	2.3 Standard Drinks
Bottle of beer/ale/stout (330ml, ABV 4.3%)	Pint of beer/ale/stout (568ml, ABV 4.3%)	Pint of strong beer/ale/stout (568ml, ABV 5%)
2 Standard Drinks	1.1 Standard Drinks	1.1 Standard Drinks
Pint of Cider (568ml, ABV 4.5%)	Bottle of alcopop (275ml, ABV 5%)	Single pub measure of spirits (35.5ml, ABV 37.5%)

Day	Type and quantity of drink e.g. small glass of wine, pint of beer	Number of standard drinks per drink	Number of drinks	Total	Where was I? Who was I with?
Example	Pint of beer	2	2	4	In pub with friends
Monday					
Tuesday					
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					
Saturday					
Sunday					
WEEKLY TOTAL					

Alcohol

The Forgotten Risk

Being open and honest about alcohol use is vital in being able to make positive changes says Anne Gallagher, cardiac rehabilitation co-ordinator at Mater Misericordiae University Hospital.

"The first thing that patients expect you to talk about is smoking or being overweight and then to discuss things like high cholesterol and high blood pressure," says Anne. "I'm not sure if it's a cultural thing in Ireland but as a nation, we tend not to put alcohol on the table for discussion in the same way."

Cardiac rehabilitation

At the Mater Hospital, Anne co-ordinates eight-week-long rehabilitation courses for cardiac patients.

"We make a point in our cardiac rehab centre to make sure that alcohol is discussed – in sessions with the dietitian, in our group sessions and in the structured one-to-one discussions that happen between nurses and each patient.

"We use a risk factor chart that the patient can then hold onto that explains what standard drinks are. We always start a discussion by asking if a person drinks alcohol. We're not presuming anything and some people can be sensitive about it, particularly if there have been problems with alcohol in the past.

"The questions that we ask are open questions so that they lead to a discussion rather than asking somebody 'Do you drink a lot' as they may not know the answer to that question – 'What is a lot?'

"At this stage, we've gotten to know the patients a little and they know we're going to have this chat about alcohol so everybody is having this discussion about alcohol, it's not just them.

Anne then asks about how much alcohol a person is typically consuming and explains what the recommended maximum limits are – 11 standard drinks a week for women and 17 standard drinks for men.

Then I explain what a standard drink equates to in wine, beer or spirits. Some people are really surprised when they realise themselves how much they are drinking – they may not be consciously thinking about it over the course of a week.

"Very often people will say 'I used to have a glass of wine at the end of the day, then I was having two glasses every night, then I started opening a second bottle.' One patient realised that every night of the working week, he was having a bottle of wine. He had started to check if he had a bottle of wine in the house even ahead of whether there was a carton of milk in the fridge. He was very into his fitness and made a conscious decision that something had to change – so he now only drinks moderately at the weekend."



Alcohol dependency

Anne says that sometimes she needs to delve deeper with people on their alcohol use.

"There is a significant percentage of people who have a dependency problem and they need very specific help. Some people may be drinking 10 or 15 alcoholic drinks a night and they may either be totally in denial about their dependency or else they know it's a problem and need some help to make changes.

In cases where there is an alcohol dependency, Anne can refer patients to a psychologist to work through some of the issues around why the person is drinking heavily.

Alcohol and health

Understanding more about how alcohol affects the body can really click with people.

"A lot of cardiac patients may have other problems with their kidneys, liver or have diabetes and we explain that when someone is getting older, some organs just don't handle something like

alcohol as well as they may have done earlier in life.

"People can be genuinely surprised to find out how many calories are in alcohol and how much sugar. Another thing that people aren't always aware of is that alcohol can be a contributing factor to high blood pressure."

During the rehab course, participants get a real sense of how alcohol can be affecting their blood pressure.

"We take blood pressure readings and sometimes there can be a quite a change between one day and another. We'd always ask – were you in a rush coming in today as being a bit stressed out can raise your blood pressure. But we'd also ask if the person was out last night and also if they drank alcohol.

"Very often people will say 'I used to have a glass of wine at the end of the day, then I was having two glasses every night, then I started opening a second bottle.'"



"Some people may be drinking 10 or 15 alcoholic drinks a night and they may be totally in denial about their dependency."



"They can see for themselves that those drinks are having a real effect on their blood pressure, they're more likely to cut down and they often see the result in their blood pressure level reducing."

Another vital point is how alcohol affects the choices we make.

"If somebody is persistently on that cycle of having a few drinks every night or many nights during the week, they're more likely to have some fast food for a pick me up or they're less likely to decide to do some physical activity. So alcohol can affect the other lifestyle changes for heart health.

Alcohol – the depressant

"We also talk to patients about how alcohol can have a depressive effect on the body. For someone who is experiencing depression or anxiety, it's always worth emphasising the depressing effect that alcohol can have and that it's something to be very aware of. But for many people alcohol numbs difficult feelings, which makes it a complex issue to deal with.

For people who are re-adjusting after treatment for a cardiac condition, they may be going through a lot of emotional feelings so alcohol may not be the best choice for them.

"Again, it's about gently making the person aware that their drinking habit may not be doing them good, and it may actually be doing them harm."

Anne says it's all about making people think about their alcohol use and incorporating change that they feel comfortable with.

"If somebody really doesn't want to make a change, it's not our aim to make them feel worse about themselves. It's more to try and gently find out the facts and give them the supports that they need if they do want to make a change.

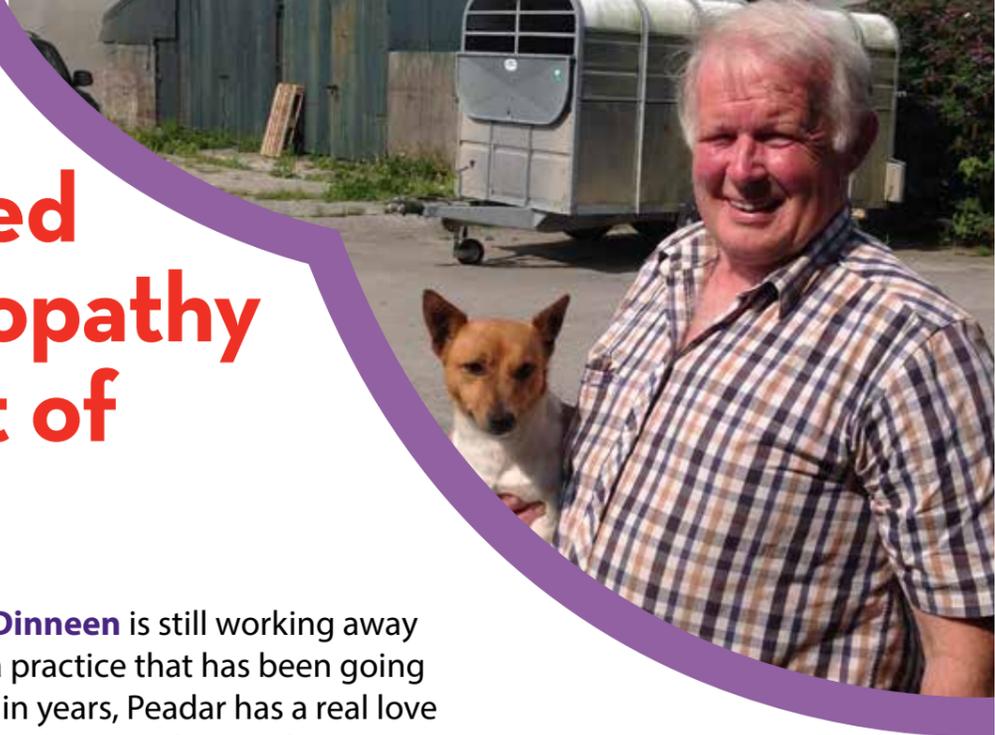
"For some people who drink way above the recommended amount, it can actually be harmful for them stop immediately as they'd go through dreadful withdrawals. So they would need to be referred on so that they have guidance in how to safely reduce their alcohol consumption.

"For other people though, it's a case of considering could they make a start on changing their behaviour. Rather than making a big dramatic change that they don't feel comfortable with, I'd say to someone drinking four pints a night, would you try to have three pints?"

"Ultimately I'm going to be asking them to go further with cutting down but it's a good place to start."

I developed cardiomyopathy as a result of drinking

At 70 years of age, **Peadar Dinneen** is still working away as a vet in West Cork. With a practice that has been going “for too long to remember” in years, Peadar has a real love for his job and has combined that with family life – raising a son and three daughters with his wife. But going back 23 years, Peadar was given a diagnosis that gave him a real wake up call for his health.



How it started

“I had this feeling that I just wasn’t interested in anything much and I felt a bit rotten one particular day,” Peadar says. He can’t recall particular symptoms but just this overall sensation of not feeling well.

He went to see his GP who recommended that he go to hospital to get checked out.

“That’s when they discovered that I had an irregular heartbeat – cardiomyopathy. I hadn’t been aware of it at all.”

While Peadar’s father had died of a heart attack aged 49, Peadar’s aunts and uncles had lived into their 80s or 90s. There wasn’t any family history of cardiomyopathy, as far as he was aware.

Alcohol to blame

“The condition was caused by my drinking,” he says. “At the time, I didn’t think that I was drinking a lot but I knew that money was being spent. The reality was that I was drinking heavily.

“Looking back on it, it was a bit chaotic. I think I had just accepted that it was normal behaviour – at the time, fellows would go and have a few drinks at lunch time and people had a very different attitude to things like drink driving.

“It was different times I suppose but I thought my drinking was normal. People around me might have thought it was a problem though.”

“Peadar was advised that he needed to stop drinking alcohol because of his cardiomyopathy”

Peadar was advised that he needed to stop drinking alcohol because of his cardiomyopathy.

He was also put on tablets for his condition, which he still takes today and calls them “a small price to pay”.

Coping with cardiomyopathy

After his diagnosis and a stay in hospital 23 years ago when Peadar came home, he kept drinking for a while. “But this was the first time that I could relate alcohol to my problems and it was very clear that I couldn’t go on the way I was.” He then went into a 28 day alcohol rehabilitation programme and says that it helped to change his mindset.

“I think if you throw mud at a wall often enough, some of it will stick. I joined Alcoholics Anonymous and I never got compulsions for drink after that, apart from one lapse a long time ago now.”

A second chance for Peadar

A year after giving up alcohol, Peadar stopped smoking too. He is in good health now and hasn’t had further incidents with his cardiomyopathy as it is being controlled with medication and monitored regularly.

“I thought my drinking was normal. People around me might have thought it was a problem.” though.”

It was through this monitoring that Peadar’s doctor recommended that he have surgery to insert a stent, as a preventative measure.

And in the last few months, Peadar has attended a cardiac rehabilitation course at Bon Secours Hospital in Cork.

“I found it good in terms of the exercise and the practical lifestyle information given. I’ve lost 10 lbs due to the exercise and I also lost four inches off my tummy – I’ve put one inch back on but that’s not too bad. I still go to the class once a month to do the sequence of exercises and weights and then I walk as well in my own time.”

Peadar feels that he was fortunate in a way that his cardiomyopathy made the decision for him to stop drinking alcohol.

“I think I wanted out of the drink anyway and knew deep down that the amount I was drinking wasn’t normal. It can be really hard to acknowledge that but being told about the cardiomyopathy made me face it.”



HANGOVERS

Anyone that’s ever had one, knows the feeling of waking up with a bad hangover from the night before. A hangover is your body’s way of getting rid of all the toxins your body consumed. Alcohol can generally affect you in two ways- psychologically and physically.

Alcohol is a depressant which can make you cranky and irritable. Alcohol can affect hormones in your brain, such as serotonin and dopamine which affect your moods and make you feel down or depressed after heaving drinking.

Alcohol dehydrates your body. Alcohol is a diuretic which makes you pass more urine more frequently, causing dehydration if fluid is not replaced.

Alcohol affects your sleep quality making you feel tired even if you’ve slept for a long period.

Alcohol can lower your blood sugar and can also lower your stored sugar in the liver. Some people make more sugar to compensate and others don’t, which makes them have low blood sugar, making them hungry, shaky, weak and have cravings and headaches.

Alcohol can irritate the lining of your stomach and increase stomach acid which causes nausea and stomach pain.

Alcohol widens the blood vessels in your head causing headaches and light sensitivity.

Developing a dependency on alcohol



For some people, social drinking can develop into a dependency on alcohol – and they may not even be aware that it has happened. Dr Conor Farren, Addiction Psychiatrist at St Patrick’s University Hospital, explains how this can occur and the supports available to people.

A Health Research Board report on Irish drinking patterns has brought to light some startling facts and figures.

A HRB report states that:

- More than 150,000 people are dependent drinkers,
- More than 1.35 million are harmful drinkers
- 30 per cent of people say that they experienced some form of harm as a result of their own drinking.
- We underestimate what we drink by about 60 per cent.

“If this is the case, the situation is much worse than what has been presented in this report.”

Dr Farren agrees that 150,000 dependent drinkers in Ireland is likely to be an underestimate.

“As a portrait of where we are with alcohol in Ireland, the report is very stark. The Health Research Board has

been excellent at looking at the whole issue of alcohol abuse in Ireland but the problem with reports is that quite a lot of attention is paid to them at the time that they’re released but then the public consciousness moves on from them.

“What needs to happen is that people read reports like this and really connect it with their own drinking behaviour.”

Why do we underestimate how much alcohol we consume?

“Certainly some of it is a lack of awareness – people not knowing what the recommended limits are,” says Dr Farren. “And then some of it is down to the fact that people don’t pay enough attention to their alcohol consumption. Someone may have a couple of drinks after the cinema on a Friday or they drink some wine while watching Coronation Street in the evening.

“They genuinely have no awareness that they’re drinking as much as they are over the course of a week. Alcohol is so common in society – almost every social occasion involves alcohol and it’s become so integrated in our lives.

“Along with that, in Ireland, alcohol is widely available through our licensing laws and is also much cheaper now. Nowadays, people can easily and cheaply buy a slab of 12 or 20 beers but 20 years ago, even the idea of buying a slab of beers didn’t exist. A

slab was something that was used in construction.

“Even despite the recession, rates of drinking have stayed high.

Warning signs

Dr Farren says that people can move from social drinking into alcohol dependency through a slow and insidious transition.

There are quite a number of warning signs that a person has become dependent on alcohol and Dr Farren outlines some of the key ones.

“Whether alcohol has become a central part of a person’s life is an important factor – does a lot of what they do revolve around alcohol? Another issue is if alcohol is causing harm in someone’s life. The person themselves mightn’t think so but a family member may feel concerned by their loved one’s use of alcohol.

Alcohol harm

“Alcohol can cause harm in many ways, it might mean that someone is missing days at work or they’re tired or under performing in their job. Then there is the physical harm that alcohol dependency can cause – someone falling down, getting hurt. And the mental harm that can be caused – someone becoming irritated when intoxicated, becoming stressed by their

alcohol use or relationship problems being caused by the dependency on alcohol.”

Dr Farren says another key sign is if someone starts to have withdrawal symptoms from alcohol. “They don’t have to be the full symptoms but even things like increased sweating, headaches or irritability can be a sign that the body is becoming dependent on alcohol.”

If someone has a sense when they drink that it’s difficult to stop, this can be another indicator.

“If there’s a momentum behind someone ordering lots of drinks for themselves before closing time at the pub, there may be a problem there.”

Family history

Another key factor in alcohol dependency can be family history and Dr Farren says that anyone in this category must be careful about their alcohol use.

“Family history can actually play a part in this crossover from ordinary drinking into problem drinking. Unfortunately genetics can be relevant and can be the difference between one person being able to have a few drinks with no problem and for another person, it becoming a problem. Someone who has a family history of alcohol dependency must

“If someone is ordering lots of drinks for themselves before closing time at the pub, there may be a problem there.”

be very cautious in their own use of alcohol.”

If someone thinks that they or a relative or friend may have an alcohol dependency, what steps should they take?

Talking to your GP

“We’re never very good at measuring ourselves so I think it’s well worth getting some feedback from your GP. It’s a way to get an objective opinion on your alcohol consumption and he or she can then guide you on to further support, if it’s needed.



“It could be talking to an alcohol counsellor for a session or two or being referred to an alcohol support group. In significant cases, if a GP is worried about the alcohol consumption levels, it may mean being referred to a rehabilitation clinic.

“I think the first step for many people is to get information about alcohol recommended limits and to see where they fit in with their consumption. And their GP is a wonderful resource – especially if they’re not sure if they’ve crossed that line from social drinking to dependency on alcohol.”

GPs are now encouraging patients to talk about how much they drink, with the help of a ‘standard drink’ measuring glass. This new initiative is being led out by the Irish College of General Practitioners.

Your heart can’t drink like you can

SAY ‘WHEN’ SOONER

Making **positive changes** for your heart health

We've covered how important it is to stay within the guideline levels if you choose to drink alcohol. In addition, there is a whole range of positive steps you can take to reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke and other health conditions.

KEEPING ACTIVE



Regular physical activity has many benefits for your heart – it strengthens it, improves your circulation, helps control your weight, lowers your blood pressure and cholesterol levels. And being active helps produce your body's own 'Happy Hormones' reducing your stress levels.

People who are regularly active are at a much reduced risk of developing heart disease and stroke, compared to those who are not active.

You should aim for at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise on five days of the week. Aerobic exercise should cause your heart to beat a little faster, make you breathe deeper and faster (but not so much that you are out of breath) and make you feel warmer all over.

Good aerobic activities include walking, cycling, jogging, dancing or swimming.

Everyday activities also count towards being physically active too – getting off the bus a few stops early and walking, heavy housework, gardening and washing your car.

TIPS FOR KEEPING ACTIVE

- Always warm up before being active and make time for a cool down period afterwards.
- Leave an hour after heavy meals before starting an exercise programme or sporting activity.
- Cut back on your TV time so that you can be more active. The average person watches 18 hours of television a week – you could easily use some of that time to go for a walk, cycle, exercise or dance class. And you can always exercise while watching telly!

EATING WELL



Healthy eating is all about getting the right balance of foods in your diet using the Food Pyramid as a guide.

Foods and Drinks high in fat, sugar and salt

These include crisps, cakes, biscuits, chocolates, sweets and soft drinks. They should be eaten in small amounts – limit to sometimes, **not** every day.

Reduced fat spreads and oils

Choose low fat or reduced fat spreads. One heaped teaspoon is enough for two slices of bread. Oils are 100% fat and all are high in calories so measure out the amount you use.

Meat, Poultry, Fish and Alternatives

Choose lean meat and lower fat versions whenever possible. Aim to eat two servings of fish, one of which should be oily fish, every week. Include pulses (beans, peas, lentils etc) in your diet, as they are a good source of protein and fibre.

Milk, Cheese and Yogurt

Choose three servings a day (they are a good source of calcium) but opt for low fat versions whenever possible. Low fat versions contain the same amount of calcium as full fat varieties.

Fruit and Vegetables

Eat five or more servings of fruit and vegetables a day- more is better. Fruit and vegetables are almost fat-free and packed with vitamins, minerals and fibre.

Bread, Cereals, Potatoes, Pasta and Rice

These foods are high in energy but low in fat. Choose at least six servings a day and opt for wholegrain varieties whenever possible.

TIPS FOR EATING WELL

- Cut down on salt. Reduce the amount of salt you add at the table or during cooking. Try other flavourings such as herbs, spices, garlic and lemon juice instead.
- Prepare and cook your meals using fresh ingredients.
- Try to read the nutrition label on food products and choose the option with the lowest levels of fat, salt and sugar.
- Choose healthier cooking methods like steaming, grilling, baking, roasting, baking and stir-frying instead of fried foods.
- Try to drink 8-10 cups of fluid each day. Water is best.
- Have a healthy snack in your bag for those peckish moments, e.g. a piece of fruit, some nuts and a bottle of water?



High blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart attack and stroke. The only way to know if your blood pressure is high is to have it checked.

Blood pressure is a measure of the force blood exerts on the arteries as it is pumped around the body.

When your heart pumps, it contracts (tightens) and the blood enters the blood vessels at a pressure (called systolic pressure). When the heart relaxes, the pressure (called diastolic pressure) falls.

Blood pressure measurements are written like a fraction, with systolic blood pressure on top and diastolic blood pressure, e.g. 120 over 80 which is a normal level of blood pressure):

What is high blood pressure?

Having high blood pressure often has no symptoms, so you could have it for a long time and be completely unaware of it.

If your blood pressure is borderline, that is a reading about 140 over 90, your GP will probably recommend you make some lifestyle changes and monitor the results.

TIPS FOR LOWERING YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE

- Cut down on alcohol
- Increase your level of physical activity
- Lose weight
- Quit the cigarettes
- Eat more fruit and vegetables, while cutting back on salt and processed foods

LOWER YOUR CHOLESTEROL

High cholesterol is one of the biggest risk factors for heart disease – yet most people don't know they have it and there are no warnings. The only way to know if you have high cholesterol is to have a blood test.

Cholesterol is a fatty substance that is produced by the liver and found naturally in the body. It plays a key role in the workings of every cell.

"We need cholesterol in the body and it only becomes a problem if you have more than your body needs, as too much can cause the build up of fatty deposits in the arteries (atherosclerosis)".

A small amount of cholesterol comes from food, like eggs, liver or shellfish. This is called dietary cholesterol. The body naturally produces the other form of cholesterol (blood cholesterol) when we eat foods that contain a lot of saturated fat such as fatty meat, cheese, butter, some sauces or trans fats such as confectionary and deep fried foods.

TIPS FOR LOWERING YOUR CHOLESTEROL

- Eat oily fish twice a week
- Choose lean meats
- Choose low-fat dairy products and spreads
- Use low-fat healthy ways of cooking like grilling or oven baking
- Aim to be a healthy weight
- Stop smoking
- Be more physically active
- Eat more fruit and vegetables
- Choose fewer fatty and sugary foods e.g. chocolate, crisps, cakes and biscuits



MAINTAIN A HEALTHY WEIGHT

Being overweight or obese causes your heart to work even harder. and can increase your risk of heart attack and stroke

Why do we put on weight?

We put on weight when our energy intake exceeds our energy output, in other words we eat and drink more than we burn off through physical activity.

What you can do to lose weight

Making changes to your diet and becoming more physically active are both essential for weight loss.

What you should not do to lose weight

Crash diets and fad diets. They are only effective in the short term and most people end up putting the weight back on in the long term. Instead choose to follow healthy eating and physical activity guidelines as outlined above.



Your heart can't drink like you can



SAY 'WHEN' SOONER



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#SayWhenSooner