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Looking to reduce or give up alcohol? In this quick guide, Dr Helen Cowan helps explain some of the key areas around the topic.

Deciding to cut down or stop drinking completely is a significant and positive step that can have numerous benefits to your health and wellbeing. Here are some of the common and lesser-known areas explained.

Abstinence

There are lots of reasons why you may want to stop drinking alcohol [2]. For some people, it's a lifestyle change. For others, stopping drinking can be essential for medical reasons, perhaps because of an alcohol-related medical condition like liver disease [3], or because you are taking medication [4] that reacts badly with alcohol. Whatever your reason, the good news is that anyone can stop drinking. And if you're thinking about removing alcohol from your life, you're not alone.

Benefits of quitting alcohol

Alcohol can affect anything from blood pressure to your brain, your mental health and your relationships. Drinking alcohol can cause seven types of cancer, including breast, bowel, mouth and throat cancer. Quitting or reducing your drinking reduces your risk of long-term illnesses and has several benefits [5] for both your mind and body, from better sleep to improved mood and energy.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

If you have an alcohol use disorder [6], CBT can be offered to help change negative thought patterns. Unhelpful and unrealistic thoughts that drive your drinking, such as "one pint can't hurt" or "this will help me relax", can be challenged by using talking therapies, including CBT, and replaced with more constructive and realistic thoughts.

Drinking diary

It can be hard to stay on top of the amount you're drinking. Keeping track of your consumption [7] can help focus attention on how much you're drinking. Planning ahead can also help to ensure you are spreading your units across three or more days and encourage you to allocate more drink–free days each week.

Effect on family

If you are regularly drinking more than 14 units a week or think you have a problem with alcohol it can have a profound impact on both you and your family. Support services [8] can offer both you and your family help. Drinkchat [8] is a free online service available for advice if someone you care about is drinking too much. Al-Anon [9] also offer support from others with shared experiences.

Fluids

As you cut down your alcohol intake, make sure to drink plenty of other fluids to stay hydrated. Water, squash and fruit juice are recommended by the NHS, rather than large amounts of tea and coffee which can leave you feeling anxious and unable to sleep. If you're looking for more exciting ideas, why not try some mocktails [10]?

Guided meditation

Researchers at King's College Clinical Trials Unit are looking into the use of guided meditation to reduce alcohol use. The Mental Imagery Intervention for Alcohol Craving study aims to find out whether mental images of future recovery from alcohol addiction can help reduce cravings. In mindfulness meditation, cravings and unhelpful thoughts are let go, with focus instead returning to the present moment.

Home or residential care

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence[1]suggests that people who are severely alcohol dependent [11] will need assisted alcohol withdrawal, typically in an in-patient or residential setting, to help safely manage symptoms of withdrawal.

Insomnia (then sleep)

Regular drinking disrupts sleep [12], reducing the Rapid Eye Movement (REM) stage, which is important for dreaming, memory and emotional processing. Sleep can, for a short time, be further disturbed when stopping alcohol – but you'll notice significant improvements to your sleep quality in the long-term.

Joining a community

If you are struggling to control your drinking, there are several online and face to face communities that can help. From social fellowship to peer support [13], joining a community can be a great way to connect and seek support from those with lived experience. Find more information on support and treatment services [8].

Kindling

When someone with alcohol addiction makes repeated attempts to quit, it is as if the brain tends to react increasingly abruptly on successive attempts: seizures and panic attacks get more likely. This has been called the "kindling effect.

Low-risk drinking

If you choose to drink, it's best to stay below 14 units a week spread over three or more days with several drink-free days and no bingeing, to keep health risks low. However, there is no completely safe drinking level.

Medication

Depending on how much you drink, and whether there are symptoms of damage from alcohol or its withdrawal, prescribed medication[2]may help in withdrawal. Used in combination with other support, medication may reduce relapse rates by curbing cravings or may cause a bad reaction to alcohol, so discouraging drinking.

New interests

Cutting down or stopping alcohol can open you up to new interests, such as woodland walks, piano lessons or learning a new craft. Enjoyment and relief exist away from alcohol, equally in the runner's high[3]and while sitting still in nature, with author Charlie Corbett declaring the impact of the skylark song on his soul as even better than "that first ice-cold gin and tonic after a hot and stressful day in the office".

Opting out of temptation

Whether you're going sober for a month, having a drink-free day [14] or stopping alcohol completely, the best way to resist temptation is to avoid it, so keep alcohol away from your house. Try and make some sober friends or offer to be the designated driver if you're with friends who drink. It can also be good to tell your family and friends that you're trying to stop, so that they can be supportive. [15]

Pregnancy

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy [16] can lead to long-term harm to your baby. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence says the safest approach is to drink no alcohol at all when pregnant or planning a pregnancy[4].

Quantify your drinking

Find out whether your drinking is hazardous by completing a self-assessment [17]. This short quiz takes only a few minutes and can give you a good indication of your health risks and whether you are drinking at a harmful level.

Reflect on the reasons you drink

Taking time to reflect on your relationship with alcohol can help with both reduction and stopping alcohol completely. Are you drinking to medicate against life's problems? Because of anxiety, a stressful job, a difficult relationship, or low self-esteem? Taking time to understand why you drink [18] can be helpful. If you're struggling, you may want to discuss your feelings with a support network or health professional.

Support services

If you are concerned that you or someone you care about has a problem with alcohol help is available. [19] There are also specialist services that cater to the specific needs of the LGBTQ+ community [20]as well as minority ethnic and faith groups [21].

Twelve steps

The 12-step programme is a widely used framework for many dealing with alcohol dependency and is a big part of mutual aid organisations such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

Use technology

Smartphone apps are changing the way many of us drink. Apps such as MyDrinkaware [7] can track alcohol consumption, calculate units and calories and help users set goals to reduce their drinking.

Volunteering

Peer support relies on the shared experience of others and can be a great and supportive way to help you cut down or stop drinking. Volunteers play a huge role in that, particularly with charities such as Change, Grow, Live [22].

Withdrawal symptoms

If you are alcohol dependent, it's important to talk to a health professional first before stopping drinking as withdrawal symptoms will pass but can be severe. Common withdrawal [23] symptoms include sweating, tremor, insomnia, vomiting and even hallucinations and seizures. Prescribed medication can safely reduce the severity of these symptoms.

eXtend kindness to yourself

Recovery is a form of self-compassion. Being kind to yourself and stopping the steady mental stream of self-criticism can help aid recovery from alcohol dependence [24].

Young people

Nobody is too young to have trouble with alcohol. In 2016, 23% of 15-year olds[5] reported having been drunk in the last four weeks. Help is available. If you are a young person [25] struggling with alcohol or are worried about someone [26] who is, start by speaking to a teacher, parent or a health professional about your concerns.

Zero alcohol beers

If you're looking to reduce your drinking, swapping regular strength alcohol drinks with alcohol-free or lower strength drinks [27] can help reduce your alcohol intake. If you are dependent on alcohol or in recovery, take care to only drink zero alcohol drinks, soft drinks or water. This is because many alcohol-free options contain some alcohol and could trigger a relapse.

The World Health Organization states that alcohol harm results in 3 million deaths each year, with alcohol named as a causal factor in more than 200 diseases and types of injury[6].

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