



# Alcohol and Dementia



Being Dementia Aware



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Age Scotland's Early Stage Dementia Project is funded by the Life Changes Trust to support the charity in raising awareness of early stage dementia and promoting the impact healthy active ageing can have on reducing the risk of dementia.

**[www.agescotland.org.uk/earlystagedementia](http://www.agescotland.org.uk/earlystagedementia)**

Drink Wise, Age Well helps people make healthier choices about alcohol as they age.

**[www.drinkwiseagewell.org.uk](http://www.drinkwiseagewell.org.uk)**



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## Introduction

Dementia is a set of symptoms associated with an ongoing decline of the brain and its abilities. This can include problems with memory loss, thinking, mental agility, language and understanding. Dementia is common – around 90,000 people in Scotland have the condition - and the risk of it developing increases as you get older. As well as age, research has identified a number of other risk factors that are associated with the development of dementia. Some of these can't be changed; however there are other factors which we may be able to change, which could help reduce our risk of getting dementia. Many of the risk factors for dementia are also risk factors for other medical conditions such as heart disease and cancer, so making small changes in your lifestyle can help protect you from a variety of health issues.

This leaflet looks at alcohol as a risk factor for dementia, as well as the other harmful effects drinking alcohol can have.

## What is dementia?

Dementia is a set of symptoms caused by damage to the brain from certain diseases or conditions. Currently, there is no cure for dementia and once a person has it, it gets progressively worse. There are many different types of dementia although some are more common than others.

The most common types of dementia are:

- **Alzheimer's disease** causes damage to brain cells. It is the most common cause of dementia, accounting for around two thirds of cases.
- **Vascular dementia** is the second most common cause of dementia. It occurs when the blood supply to the brain is impaired.
- **Dementia with Lewy Bodies** accounts for around 10% of cases of dementia. Lewy bodies are tiny deposits of protein that can build up in the cells of the brain and are associated with damage and loss of function.
- **Frontotemporal dementia** is a less common type of dementia. Frontotemporal dementia is caused when nerve cells in the frontal and/or temporal lobes of the brain die, and the pathways that connect the lobes change.
- **Mixed dementia** occurs when people develop more than one form of dementia, such as both Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia.



## Alcohol and dementia

Many of us enjoy having an alcoholic drink now and then, and alcohol can be an important part of socialising and celebrating. However, regularly drinking more than the recommended daily limits of alcohol can put you at risk of developing serious health problems.

Results from studies investigating whether alcohol consumption is linked to dementia are still not conclusive; however, many studies do suggest that drinking more than the recommended weekly limit for alcohol increases a person's risk of developing dementia. Studies have also shown that people who drink heavily or engage in binge-drinking are more likely to develop dementia than those who only drink moderately. So far it is unclear why this is the case, but it may be due to the effects alcohol can have on the brain such as directly damaging nerve cells and blood vessels.

It is recognised that very heavy, long-term drinking can cause alcohol-related brain damage which can lead to alcohol-related dementia or Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome. These are different from the dementias described above but they can produce symptoms similar to dementia such as memory loss and problems with cognition. More information on these conditions can be found below.

You may have heard that a small amount of alcohol, particularly red wine, can protect the brain against dementia and keep your heart healthy. This finding remains controversial, but most experts no longer believe that low to moderate alcohol consumption reduces the risk of dementia. It is now thought that there is no 'safe' level of alcohol consumption when it comes to dementia risk.

Exactly how alcohol and dementia are linked is still unclear so the best advice about drinking is to follow the NHS guidelines which suggest that both men and women should limit their alcohol intake to **no more than 14 units a week**, spread over 3 days or more. In general, it is fine to drink the occasional glass of wine or beer but try to stay within the NHS guidelines and have at least 2 or 3 alcohol-free days a week.

## Units

Knowing your units can help you stay in control of your drinking. Below is a list of the units in some standard drinks.

A standard glass (175ml) of (12%) wine = 2.1 units

A large glass (250ml) of (12%) wine = 3 units

A pint of lower-strength alcohol (3.6%) beer or cider = 2 units

A pint of higher-strength alcohol (5.2%) beer or cider = 3 units

A single shot of spirit eg. whisky, gin or vodka (40%) = 1 unit.

Using a 'units calculator' can be a good way of keeping track of how much you're drinking and working out if you should try to cut back. A units calculator can be found at:

**[www.drinkwiseagewell.org.uk/drink-wisely/units-calculator/](http://www.drinkwiseagewell.org.uk/drink-wisely/units-calculator/)**



## Alcohol-related brain damage

People who regularly drink at much higher levels than the recommended limits (over 50 units a week for men and over 35 units per week for women), over several years, are at a high risk of developing alcohol-related brain damage (ARBD). ARBD can cause alcohol-related dementia (also known as alcoholic dementia) and Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome.

ARBD can cause a wide-range of symptoms including problems with memory and thinking. Alcohol misuse causes this in a number of ways. Drinking alcohol excessively can result in a deficiency of vitamin B1 (thiamine) which is needed by the body to turn food into energy. Thiamine is particularly important to brain cells as they have a very high demand for energy; if this demand is not met, the cells can become damaged. Alcohol is also a toxin and can directly damage nerve cells and drinking it in excess can also cause or contribute to high blood pressure, raised cholesterol, heart attacks and strokes, all of which can damage the brain.

Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome is a type of ARBD that is caused by a severe deficiency in thiamine. The most prominent symptom of Wernicke-Korsakoff's syndrome is a loss of day-to-day memory, although in some cases more long-term memory can be affected. Other symptoms include difficulty with learning new information or skills, changes in personality and confabulation (where individuals create or 'make-up' events or information to cover for their loss of memory.)

Unlike other forms of dementia, ARBD does not necessarily get worse over time and it can be treated. Improvement in the changes that ARBD causes is possible by stopping drinking and receiving high doses of thiamine; however if a person with ARBD continues to drink, the condition is likely to progress and symptoms worsen.

## ***The other health risks of excessive drinking***

Regularly drinking more than 14 units of alcohol a week also increases the risk of a number of other illnesses, including:

### **Cancer**

Around 4% of cancers in the UK are directly attributable to alcohol. It is thought alcohol can cause cancer by damaging the DNA in cells and affecting hormone levels. Alcohol consumption particularly increases the risk of developing cancers of the mouth, throat, breast, voice box, oesophagus, liver, colon and rectum. Regularly drinking three or more units of alcohol a day increases the risk of developing liver cancer by nearly 20%.

### **Heart disease and stroke**

Drinking more than the lower risk guidelines regularly, and over a long period of time can increase your risk of developing heart disease. This is because, drinking at this level can increase the risk of developing high blood pressure. High blood pressure is one of the biggest risk factors for having a heart attack or stroke. Heavy drinking can also weaken the heart muscle which can lead to heart failure. In turn, having high blood pressure or a stroke increases the risk of developing dementia.

### **Other**

Alcohol consumption is also associated with the development of several other medical conditions including:

- Pancreatitis
- Liver disease
- Depression
- Infertility
- Type 2 diabetes
- Stomach ulcers





## Reducing your risk

There is no guaranteed 'safe' level of drinking, but if you drink less than the NHS recommended limits, the risks of harming your health are low. Consuming more than the recommended limits can be harmful and the more you drink the greater the risk is. As we age our ability to process alcohol reduces which means even drinking slightly more than the recommended limits can have a significant impact on our health.

It is important to try to recognise how much you are drinking and if you think you are experiencing problems with alcohol it is very important to talk to your GP who will be able to offer you help and support. If you go to your GP because you are concerned about your drinking, or you receive treatment for an alcohol-related injury or illness, the extent of your alcohol use is likely to be assessed. This is usually done through a question and answer assessment. You will be asked how often you drink, how much you drink, what you and those around you think about your drinking habits and how alcohol is affecting your life. It is important to answer these questions honestly so the support can be tailored for your needs.

Changing your drinking habits can be very difficult, especially if you have been drinking regularly or heavily for a long period of time. People who drink heavily have a much better chance of cutting down or stopping drinking if they get support to do so.

There are many organisations set up to offer support to individuals, and their family and friends through this process. We've listed a few on the next page:

**Drink Wise, Age Well** helps people make healthier choices about drinking as they age. It provides information on alcohol and getting older to allow you to make informed choices about alcohol use. It provides information on alcohol unit guidelines, tips for cutting down and where and how to get help if you need it.

**[www.drinkwiseagewell.org.uk](http://www.drinkwiseagewell.org.uk)**

**Drink Smarter** is run by the Scottish Government and provides information and advice about alcohol issues, how to cut back and general advice about health, wellbeing and relationships.

Helpline: **0800 7314 314**

**[www.drinksmaarter.org](http://www.drinksmaarter.org)**

**Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)** is concerned solely with the personal recovery and continued sobriety of individual alcoholics who turn to them for help.

Helpline: **0800 9177 650**

Email: **[help@alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](mailto:help@alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)**

**[www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)**

**Addaction Scotland** is the largest provider of drug and alcohol support services in Scotland.

A wide range of specialist help is available throughout Scotland in the following areas: Aberdeen, Dundee, Fife, Edinburgh and the Lothians, Scottish Borders, Dumfries and Galloway, South Ayrshire, East Ayrshire, Lanarkshire, Glasgow, East Dunbartonshire.

**[www.addaction.org.uk/help-and-support/addaction-scotland](http://www.addaction.org.uk/help-and-support/addaction-scotland)**

*It is never too late to moderate your drinking and take steps to make your life healthier. If you are a heavy drinker, reducing your intake or stopping drinking altogether will greatly improve your chances of enjoying a healthy, disease-free life.*



## Useful Contacts

### Age Scotland

Age Scotland is the largest charity in Scotland dedicated to enabling everyone to make the most of later life. We provide information for people through our publications and online.

**[www.agescotland.org.uk](http://www.agescotland.org.uk)**

**Age Scotland helpline: 0800 12 44 222**

The Age Scotland helpline provides information, friendship and advice to older people, their relatives and carers.

### Alzheimer Scotland

Alzheimer Scotland is the leading dementia organisation in Scotland. It campaigns for the rights of people with dementia and their families and provides an extensive range of innovative and personalised support services.

Freephone 24 hour Dementia Helpline: **0808 808 3000**

Email: **[info@alzscot.org](mailto:info@alzscot.org)**

**[www.alzscot.org.uk](http://www.alzscot.org.uk)**

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0800 12 44 222

**Age Scotland Enterprises**  
0800 456 1137 (Edinburgh)  
0800 500 3159 (Glasgow)



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Age Scotland, part of the Age Network, is an independent charity dedicated to improving the later lives of everyone on the ageing journey, within a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in Scotland. Registration Number 153343. Charity Number SC010100.