



CUTTING DOWN ALCOHOL SIX STEPS & TEN TOP TIPS

Drinking is a reflexive and primary human behaviour, which we have all been doing since birth! The act of drinking itself is comforting and stimulates relaxation, we know this instinctively when we are children before we start consuming alcohol - we are so happy to have a drink of water when we are really thirsty or a delicious glass of squash or other tasty soft drink! Start retraining yourself today to enjoy and be aware of the act of drinking itself, just like you used to be able to do as a child.



STEP ONE - start by working out what you drink in an average week by reviewing the last couple of weeks. If it is difficult to remember keep a daily note for the next couple of weeks to get your current average units per week. Note all the drinks, the alcoholic strength so you can calculate the units in each drink, note the times of day and where you were when you were drinking. If the weeks are typical weeks, your notes should give you a good idea how much you are drinking, whether you are drinking too much and the situations in which you most likely drink and that might be harder to cut down in.



STEP TWO - Decide what your goal is. Do you want to give up alcohol altogether for a month or longer? Do you want to cut down to get closer to safe guideline limits (14 units weekly limit for men and women)? Or do you want to manage/reduce binge-drinking and all the problems that go with it. It is better to start off with modest goals and gradually get more ambitious. The decision is yours but be clear about what you want to achieve.



STEP THREE - Pick a day in the next week to start cutting down. Go for a day when you are likely to be relaxed and not under too much pressure. It is probably best to avoid big occasions or celebrations as a day to start cutting down. Plan ahead for a day when it is easier to limit your alcohol intake.



STEP FOUR - Work out how you can avoid situations when you know you end up drinking more. If you often drink at home, stock up on alternatives to alcohol, like soft drinks and alcohol-free beers, lagers or wine. If it is more common for you to drink in social situations, you might tell some selected friends that you are cutting down. Ask them not to put pressure on you to drink and they might even join in with you. Of course, you don't have to tell other people but it is definitely helpful that those most close to you know so they can then be supportive.



STEP FIVE - Keep 'chipping away' away and persevere. Do not give up if things don't always go completely to plan! Changing habits like drinking takes consistent hard work but it does get easier over time, as long as you don't give up. Sometimes it will be difficult to drink less so be compassionate and understanding towards yourself and keep focusing on the positive reductions/changes you have achieved, even if they are smaller than you had planned. If you do feel yourself slipping back into heavier drinking habits, set a new date to start reducing again.



STEP SIX - If after several weeks of concerted effort you find it extremely difficult to cut down, you could think about seeing a trained alcohol counsellor or you can find more information, tips and contacts from Recovery Org <https://www.recovery.org.uk/alcohol-abuse/alcohol-abuse-helpline/> who will also be able to provide advice and support.



TEN TOP TIPS



1. Keep a drink diary - Keep a note on a regular basis of how much you drink so you know when you have reached your limit for the week. It will help you keep track of the situations that are more difficult for you to cut down in so you can develop specific strategies for those situations.



2. Set and stick to your limits - Work out in advance a reasonable weekly drinking limit and a limit for each day when you drink and stick to it. If you drink more on one day in a week, drink less on the next day so you stick to your limit. Set a limit for particular occasions like parties, celebrations or nights out at bars/clubs.



3. Beware self-poured drinks - Watch what you drink at home, or in other people's homes or for pre-going out drinks, which are poured by either yourself or by your friends. Most people pour much larger drinks than the fixed bar/pub/club measures, especially/particularly of spirits. Use/choose/ask for a smaller size glass of wine and beer, select lower alcohol content drinks and avoid shots/spirits as often as possible. Avoid having a drink straight away when you join your friends or when you get home from work, have a thirst quenching soft drink or a caffeinated drink first.



4. It is OK to say NO - Try not to let anyone pressure you into having a drink or having another drink. If you think saying NO could be difficult, have some reasons lined up, especially for the early days of cutting down as you are building your confidence around controlling your alcohol consumption. Examples of reasons you could give: "I am exhausted, I need some caffeine to wake me up before any alcohol!" or "No thanks, I have so much on tomorrow, I can't risk a hangover!" or "No alcohol allowed with the antibiotics/medication I'm taking!"



5. Pace/slow down your drinking - Try taking smaller sips and savour every single sip so you are consciously aware of the taste in your mouth and the coolness in your throat as you swallow. Try putting your glass down more often or in between every sip. Choose smaller drinks like halves instead of pints, avoid shots/spirits and higher strength brands. Try spacing out alcoholic drinks by alternating them with soft drinks or no-alcohol beers/wine or alcohol-free cocktails. Avoid rounds as they often mean you drink more than you want. If you can't avoid rounds completely, skip/decline another drink sometimes and when it is your round, buy an alcohol-free drink for yourself.



6. Occupy yourself while you are drinking - Find something else to do like playing darts or pool or cards or chess or any other games you can play in a group or by yourself. These will distract you from drinking and help you to drink more slowly.



7. Find alternative ways to manage your feelings - Get out of the habit of drinking to manage feelings of anxiety, tension, boredom or other negative emotion. Find other ways to manage negative feelings that don't involve alcohol so you start to reduce any dependency on alcohol to manage your emotions. Anything you enjoy doing that helps you relax or feel good will be suitable substitutes, things like exercise, meditation, yoga, mindful breathing, any creative activity that occupies your hands, any study activity that stimulates your intellect. Find what works for you through trial and error.



8. Personal drinking rules - If you are trying to cut down, changing your relationship with alcohol is important by developing new rules. Having days off is essential and proves to yourself that you can control your drinking. Make a list of your own personal alcohol rules, here are a few examples: a) not drinking during the week, b) not drinking on consecutive days, c) not drinking before 7pm and not after 11pm, d) a minimum of 4 alcohol-free days each week. Stick to your rules, no excuses, but they must be your rules, not rules imposed on you by others.



9. Reward yourself - Cutting down requires conscious self-control so you should be pleased with yourself for any successes, no matter how small. Reward yourself by giving yourself a treat, perhaps buy yourself a gift with the money you save from drinking less. Be honest with yourself and reward yourself when you meet or are close to meeting the targets you set yourself. Don't reward yourself with alcohol though!



10. Alcohol is NOT your friend - Remind yourself of this because alcohol is a dis-inhibitor that negatively changes the way the brain processes information. It is a depressant that reduces neuronal firing and thus reduces our ability to make good decisions and manage our emotions. It literally makes us more stupid when we are under its influence and this effect starts after only one or two drinks! The more we drink, the worse our decisions and behaviour become and the more likely we are to damage social relationships and put ourselves in physical danger. This contributes significantly to the debilitating 'hang-over' effect we can experience the next day of heightened/intense anxiety, guilt, shame, depression and self-reproach as we replay things we may have said and done the night before that we regret when sober.

Good luck!