



Managing Alcohol Consumption

Drinking alcohol is often linked with positive associations: social occasions, enjoying celebrations and relaxation. But, drinking alcohol can become more problematic when we use it to manage our moods or feelings, or to increase our social confidence.

Social drinking can be extremely pleasurable and moderate drinking may even have health benefits for some of us. However, it also has some potential downsides. Although it can feel as though alcohol initially acts as a mood-enhancer, it is ultimately a depressant; so heavy drinking is likely to leave you feeling worse rather than better. Also, the more you drink, and the more often you drink, the larger the quantity you will need to feel the same effects. Over a period of time, habitual over-consumption can have a wide range of consequences – social, psychological and physical.

Much of university and college social life can seem centred on college bars or pubs. At times it may feel as though peer groups support excessive intake or may resist or even ridicule any attempt to cut down on drinking. Being at university presents opportunities to sample all sorts of new experiences. Many of these in themselves can also be sources of potential stress and worry and alcohol can sometimes become a way of managing the trickier emotional experiences of student life. Experiences at university can encompass risk taking and pushing limits and, being away in Cambridge, often means that familiar and respected figures that might have offered help and guidance may not be around.

Attitudes to alcohol

Alcohol can readily become associated with some of the issues and transitions that you are facing. Its ability to disinhibit can help you to relax, and to reduce tension but it also lends itself to being used to avoid or manage difficult situations. Drinking in the college bar may give you a relaxed sense of community but over time, if it becomes habitual, it can be hard to relax without it.

Reducing or limiting intake

Here are some ideas that may help you to cut down your intake:

- Use an online tool to learn about how much alcohol is present in different drinks that you consume.
- Keep a diary of intake in units to clarify your pattern of use and quantities. Cutting down works best if you set limits for yourself that *you* feel you might reasonably stick to. Those limits need to be low enough so that you are not intoxicated, at which point sticking to a limit becomes very difficult.
- Space out your drinks, starting to drink later and alternating consumption with non-alcoholic drinks.
- Identify those occasions, times of day, companions, or moods when you are prone to excessive use. This might help you to learn to avoid trigger points.
- Rather than just focusing on *reducing* your alcohol intake, think about *increasing* some other activity. There are lots of different and novel opportunities to do something different while you are at university and maybe some can also be useful new ways of managing your emotional experience.
- Try to have 2-3 drink free days every week.

- The influence of others can be powerful, so use it to support yourself; friends may well have been concerned about you for some time.
- It can be helpful to write up a balance sheet of the pros and cons of drinking, in order to clarify whether you are really determined to cut down.
- Drinking with food rather than instead of it can be important.
- It might also help to try to cut down your intake with the support of a group.

Helping others

It can be extremely distressing if someone you care about is drinking at levels that give rise to problems. Although you can encourage and support them to make changes, only they can ultimately decide (and be prepared) to do the changing. If you are particularly sensitive about alcohol (e.g. because of related problems in your family) it may be helpful to bear this in mind.

Some suggestions to help are:

- Allow space for them to talk about anything that may be bothering them.
- Rather than labelling them, focus on the effects drink is having on others, as well as on themselves.
- Make clear what behaviour is unacceptable to you and avoid arguments.
- Try not to cover up for them.
- Ensure that the burden of support does not rest entirely on you, and that you have time for yourself too.

Seeking help

There is further help available. Your tutor and college nurse will have spoken to others before - you won't be the first (or last), and you are likely to find that they can make useful and supportive suggestions. You could also of course make contact with your GP or practice nurse. Counselling can help you to understand and address the personal and emotional aspects to your alcohol intake and offer individual confidential consultations throughout the year.

The counsellors at UCS will be very willing to talk things over with you and help you work out what is best for you to do. We can particularly help with any underlying problems that may be associated with drinking excessively, but we will usually refer you to specialist agencies for help with dependency or for medical support.

Some tools that can help

You'll find information on a range of resources to help address alcohol intake, as well as other issues, on the University Staff Counselling Service website: <https://staff.counselling.cam.ac.uk>

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