

Harmful alcohol use

Red flags:

- What worries do you have about your future health?
- Had you ever thought that (e.g. your depression) might be linked to your drinking habits?
- Could this problem be linked to any of your habits? Your drinking perhaps?
- Have you ever had the shakes (or DTs) when you have missed drinking for a day or two?
- How much alcohol do you drink in an average week? (work out units)
- Has your alcohol intake caused problems at work / with finances/ with your family?
- How is your mood?

(FAST questions:

1. How often have you had (6 or more units female) (8 or more units male) on a single occasion in the last year?
2. How often have you failed to do what was expected of you because of your drinking?
3. How often in the last year have you been unable to remember the night before because of your drinking?
4. Has anyone been concerned about your drinking, or suggested that you cut down?)

Provide:

Your drinking habits are hazardous and are likely to be causing you harm. You mentioned..

You are drinking in a harmful way. This is already causing you harm. Perhaps I could check that you aren't physically dependent on alcohol yet. Have you ever had the shakes (or DTs) when you have missed drinking for a day or two?

You seem motivated to do something about your blood pressure, but you are not overly keen to take tablets for the rest of your life. How's about some easy life style changes? (Perhaps you would be happy to listen to this options discussion in realgeneralpractice.co.uk and come back to me, on the phone, for support once you know what might work for you.)

From what you have told me so far: alcohol is likely to be driving you high blood pressure. If we could help you to change your drinking habits, I bet that your blood pressure would be much better.

I've been looking at your notes and you seem to have kept the casualty department busy recently. I'm guessing that alcohol is playing a part in that? I'm concerned that you could be injuring more than just your skin and bones. Would you like any help, or suggestions, to tackle your drinking?

Losing your mum hit you hard and you mentioned that you were worried about your own risk of cancer. Alcohol causes cancer, including bowel cancer. Perhaps it's time that I supported you to drink more healthily?

Your liver enzymes show that your liver is getting some grief. You have a fatty liver. Partly through your drinking and partly through your weight. Fatty liver causes type 2 diabetes and sometimes cirrhosis of the liver. Perhaps we should check your average sugar test (a blood test) and you might even want an ultrasound test of your liver. What do you think? Would you like any help, or suggestions, to tackle your drinking?

You mentioned that you were worried about dementia (or your memory). You can reduce your risk of dementia by a factor of 3 by drinking safely. Does that interest you? Would....

Your sleep sounds a real issue. Even if you don't have sleep apnoea, alcohol causes you to have poor quality sleep, (although I admit that it can help you to get off to sleep), so it will leave you feeling unrefreshed after sleep. Perhaps you would be interested in listening to the options discussion on realgeneralpractice.co.uk about insomnia. Would

You mentioned that your energy levels were low (and that you were feeling anxious and/or low). Drinking harmfully will affect your energy levels and tackling that will almost certainly be the first step towards you getting your mojo back.

It's clearly not been easy for you to avoid gaining weight. You mentioned that you have been drinking a bit more than recommended levels. I reckon that that is making it almost impossible for you to get to your target weight. How's about you start by doing without alcohol for perhaps 2 (or 3) nights per week? Is that doable for you? How important is it for you to make this happen? Would....

It sounds like a lot of these headaches could be triggered by alcohol. Might you consider drying out for a month or so? Just to see if you can, and to see what effect it has on how you feel?

Crikey, it sounds as if your anxiety (or mood) is really impacting on your home life (or work, or both). I reckon that your alcohol consumption is likely to be making that a lot worse. Is it time that you started doing something about your drinking? Do you think Would...

Money sounds tight. I have a cunning plan for you.... What about doing without alcohol for 2 or 3 nights a week? Could you commit to that? What about calling me in a months time to let me know how you got on?

Perhaps you might be interested in knowing some tips from other people who have been successful in cutting back their drinking. Here is a list of tips, some of which might suit you (use the SBI leaflet). One suggestion would be to use a special wine cork and vacuum pump to keep wine fresh if you just want to drink one or 2 glasses rather than a whole bottle at one sitting. Other people have stopped drinking in rounds, or go out for a short walk together, rather than meeting in the pub. Please let me know what you think might be an achievable first step.

Harmful drinking means that your health problems are directly linked to alcohol. This is not alcohol dependence, but may lead onto dependence. The problems may be related to your stomach, your liver, pancreas, or your mental health. Harmful drinking also increases your risk of cancer, high blood pressure and heart disease or stroke.

Currently the government in the UK recommends a limit of 14 units weekly for both men and women. However, the latest evidence suggests that no amount of alcohol is safe, and in fact any alcohol intake is associated with an increased risk of certain cancers. There are lots of resources that can help you to work out how many units you are drinking (the drinkcoach app for example.)

There are different ways to try to reduce your alcohol. Some people replace their drinks with lower strength options. Others opt to replace every second drink with water or a soft drink. Some people find that they need to change their daily routine for example going for a walk in the evening rather than staying at home and having a drink.

Safety net:

With your current alcohol intake it's extremely unlikely that you would get the shakes with stopping drinking. If you did get the shakes, there is a tiny risk that you could have a convulsion, or see hallucinations. Have a drink (of alcohol) if you get the shakes and ween off the booze slowly.

We have talked about some of the ways in which you might start reducing your alcohol intake. If you notice that your alcohol intake is increasing, or you cannot get through the day without a drink in the morning, or if you get withdrawal symptoms such as a tremor when you miss drinking for a day, then please come back to see me.

If your mood drops and you are sad, depressed, or experiencing suicidal thoughts, please call me to talk about this. We can arrange an urgent appointment if needs be.

If you think that you might be alcohol dependent, please let me know. Make a phone appointment if you like. You might need specialist support to tackle the dependence, but I'm always happy to be your first port of call.