



skinsupport

changing how you feel about your skin



Overcoming problematic use of alcohol to cope with skin related distress

A self-help leaflet created for the British Association of Dermatologists' SkinSupport website,
2014

This leaflet is designed to provide you with information on:

1. The relationship between alcohol, your mood and your skin.
2. Identifying problem drinking - this includes a self-assessment tool which you can use to look at your use of alcohol
3. The costs and benefits of changing my drinking patterns.
4. Strategies for taking control of unhelpful drinking
5. Forming a plan

Alcohol is readily available and cheap to buy, it is often at the centre of social gatherings and celebrations, and we often 'treat' ourselves to a drink. In addition, alcohol is commonly used as a way of 'self-medicating' and dealing with stress, and this can sometimes become a factor in drinking alone. In a study of alcohol use in people with the skin condition psoriasis, between 17% and 30% of the participants were found to use alcohol at levels likely to be problematic for their physical and emotional health (Kirby, Richards, Mason, Fortune, Main & Griffiths, 2007)

Stress and alcohol

Living with a significant skin condition can be stressful, this stress can in turn affect the condition.

"Stress is definitely a key factor. The worst times have been I guess stress when my brother passed away and soon after that I literally had an infection that lasted a few months"

Quote from patient with eczema

In addition to stressful life events which can affect the condition some people report feeling anxious about the visibility of their skin condition. You may yourself have experienced negative reactions from other people such as staring or comments. This can cause stress and increase anxiety or nervousness when you think about going out.

“I do feel anxious going into situations; I don’t know how to describe it. I wonder what people are thinking when they look at me, I wonder what would I be thinking if I saw a person with skin like that”

Quote from patient with eczema

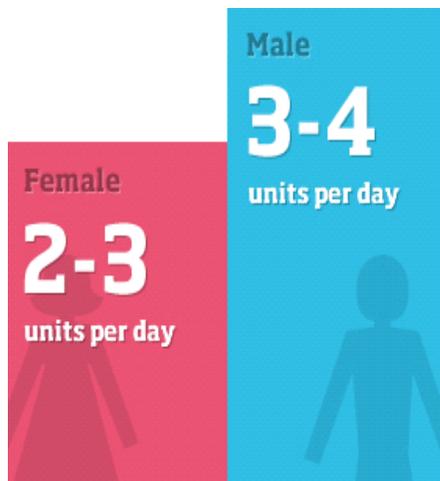
There is a lot to take into account when living with a skin condition, and it can have a big impact on your mood.

“I have suffered from depression from time to time and it has been a contributor, sometimes it has been a major contributor”

Quote from patient with alopecia

What is problematic drinking?

It is known that there is a risk some people may use alcohol as a way of coping. However, drinking to excess can be dangerous and lead to long term health problems. The National Health Service suggests we stay within the drinking limits outlined below for optimal health.



To understand what is meant by units you can see how many units are in drinks listed below.

- 1 pint beer (5% vol) = 3 units
- 1 pint lager (3% vol) = 2 units
- 175ml glass wine (12% vol) = 2 units
- 1 measure spirit (40% vol) = 1 unit

Part 1: The relationship between alcohol, mood, and skin conditions

People often say they have a drink after a stressful day to relax and unwind, but what if we learned that drinking alcohol could be having the opposite effect? In Britain, people who experience anxiety and/or depression are twice as likely to use alcohol heavily.

Alcohol is actually a depressant. When we first have a drink the neurons in our brain start to fire and release serotonin. Serotonin is known as the ‘happy chemical’ so initially we may experience

a lift in our mood. However, after a short time of continued drinking our serotonin levels actually drop. This is why people often report feeling low after a night out drinking.

Warning signs that alcohol is affecting your mood include:

- Tiredness
- Irritability
- Anxiety symptoms
- Low mood
- Disturbed sleep

Alcohol and the skin

Drinking heavily can also affect our physical health - if you are living with a skin condition it is important to be aware of how alcohol may affect your condition and the success of your medical treatment.

- Alcohol dehydrates the skin depleting it of essential nutrients, which can leave it dry. Skin conditions such as eczema and psoriasis which dry skin out are likely to be worsened by drinking alcohol.
- Excessive alcohol intake may result in a zinc deficiency, in severe cases this can actually cause dermatitis and negatively effect the skins ability to heal.
- Alcohol can affect some medication, it is important if you are taking medication for your skin condition that you check with your doctor what the guidelines are for drinking alcohol.

Summary

It can be tempting to self-medicate with alcohol as a result of stress and worry that can arise as a result of living with a skin condition. However, in this section we have described how drinking heavily can affect our mood, and it can actually trigger feelings of low mood. In addition drinking heavily can dehydrate the skin and negatively effect its ability to heal. Lastly, alcohol may interact with medication so as to reduce its effectiveness.

Part 2: Identifying problem drinking

You might find it helpful to think about your drinking habits using the questionnaire below. The questionnaire was designed by the World health organisation to identify problem drinking.

<p>1. How often do you have a drink containing alcohol?</p> <p>(0) Never (skip to Q's 9-10)</p> <p>(1) Monthly or less</p> <p>(2) 2-4 times a month</p> <p>(3) 2-3 times a week</p> <p>(4) 4 or more times a week</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Score.....</p>	<p>6. How often during the last year have you needed a first drink in a morning to get you going after a heavy drinking session?</p> <p>(0) Never</p> <p>(1) Less than monthly</p> <p>(2) Monthly</p> <p>(3) Weekly</p> <p>(4) Daily or almost daily</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Score.....</p>
--	---

<p>2. How many drinks containing alcohol do you have on a typical day when you are drinking?</p> <p>(0) 1-2</p> <p>(1) 3-4</p> <p>(2) 5-6</p> <p>(3) 7,8 or 9</p> <p>(4) 10 or more</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Score</p>	<p>7. How often during the past year have you had a feeling of guilt or remorse after drinking?</p> <p>(0) Never</p> <p>(1) Less than monthly</p> <p>(2) Monthly</p> <p>(3) Weekly</p> <p>(4) Daily or almost daily</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Score.....</p>
---	--

<p>3. How often during the last year have you found you were not able to stop drinking once you started</p> <p>(0) Never</p> <p>(1) Less than monthly</p> <p>(2) Monthly</p> <p>(3) Weekly</p> <p>(4) Daily or almost daily</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Score</p>	<p>9. Have you or someone else been injured as a result of your drinking?</p> <p>(0) No</p> <p>(2) Yes, but not in the last year</p> <p>(4) Yes, during the last year</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Score.....</p>
---	--

<p>4. How often during the last year have you failed to do what was expected of you because of drinking?</p> <p>(0) Never</p> <p>(1) Less than monthly</p> <p>(2) Monthly</p> <p>(3) Weekly</p> <p>(4) Daily or almost daily Score.....</p>	<p>10. Has a relative, or a friend, dr or other health worker been concerned about your drinking or suggest you cut down?</p> <p>(0) No</p> <p>(2) Yes, but not in the last year</p> <p>(4) Yes, during the last year Score.....</p> <p><i>This tool was developed by the World Health organisation (1992) AUDIT.</i></p>
--	--

Now add the scores from all 10 questions

Scores above 8 may indicate problem drinking. If your score is much higher than 8 you should consider speaking to your Dr to look at support available to help you in reducing or stopping drinking

Part 3: Deciding to change; the costs and benefits of changing my drinking patterns

Deciding to reduce or stop drinking alcohol is a big step, it is a change in your lifestyle and this is likely to be challenging. The good news is that there are alternatives to using alcohol to cope. Before looking at these alternative strategies we need to first decide that making a change to our use of alcohol is something we want to try. Looking at your reasons for stopping or reducing alcohol intake is helpful as it can be motivating. When trying to think of the reasons why you'd like to reduce or stop drinking its important to do so non-judgementally, remember it is a brave first step to acknowledge that there might be a problem.

Consider answering the questions below to get you started. In answering questions in the first box you could think about the general personal benefits of cutting down or stopping drinking. In the second and third boxes think about the benefits for your skin and general health respectively. In the final box think about other benefits (such as to your relationships or work).

<p>What would I personally gain from stopping or reducing my use of alcohol?</p> <p>1.</p> <p>2.</p> <p>3.</p>
--

How will reducing or stopping drinking help my skin condition?

1.
2.
3.

What health benefits to stopping or reducing my drinking?

1.
2.
3.

Other benefits I might notice when I stop or reduce drinking?

e.g financial, improved relationships

.....

.....

.....

Identifying triggers

The next step is to look at your drinking habits. Using a diary can help you to see if there any patterns in your drinking habits, for example are there particular times of day when you are more likely to drink heavily; or are there certain people that you drink with; or do you find that you are drinking alcohol when you are in a particular mood.

Over the next week you might find it useful to keep a diary of when you drink alcohol to help you identify your own drinking patterns. It can be particularly helpful to make a note of any specific thoughts and feelings connected with your skin and the use of alcohol. Here is an example, Sarah started to fill in an alcohol diary when she noticed she was drinking more than usual.

Day\time	Situation (what was happening, who were you with)	Thoughts (What was on my mind before I started drinking?)	Mood (how were you feeling before you started drinking) rate the intensity of your mood on a scale of 0-10 (0= low mood and 10= feeling good)	How much did I drink? (Think about alcohol in terms of number of units (page 2))	Effect of drinking on my skin. Rate on a scale of 0-10 (0= no effect and 10=large negative effect)
Wednesday 6pm	On my own, just got in from work	I feel like I'm struggling to do my job.	3/10	Bottle of wine Around 9 units	6/10 skin looked more red next day
Thursday 7pm	On my own, just got in from work	I can't seem to do anything right at work	3/10	Half a bottle of wine around 4.5 units	6/10 skin still looking red

From the example Sarah is drinking in an evening, and this appears to be due to problems at work which are having a significant impact on her mood. She is drinking well above what is recommended to maintain a healthy lifestyle and her drinking seems to be affecting her skin.

You can use your diary to answer the following questions

Do you notice particular times of day when you are drinking more? Can you think why this might be?

.....

.....

.....

Do you notice anything about your mood before you have a drink?

.....

.....

.....

Do you notice anything about your thoughts before you have a drink?

.....

.....

.....

Day\time	Situation (what was happening, who were you with)	Thoughts What was on my mind before I started drinking?	Mood (how were you feeling before you started drinking) rate the intensity of your mood on a scale of 0-10 (0= low mood and 10= feeling good)	How much did I drink? Think about alcohol in terms of number of units (page 2)	Effect of drinking on my skin. Rate on a scale of 0-10 (0= no effect and 10=large negative effect)

○ **Acknowledging difficulty**

Reducing or stopping drinking can be very challenging and it can be helpful to plan ahead to look at what difficulties might arise for us. First of all we will look at some common thoughts people have about drinking alcohol.

“I drink when I’m with my friends.....”

Social drinking is very common; when we are out in a group and everyone is drinking we can feel under pressure to do the same. Thinking about how you will manage this situation before you go can help reduce anxiety around going out.

First of all, if you have a skin condition and you are taking medication which suggests you avoid alcohol say to people, I’m not drinking at the moment because of my medication, or if you are uncomfortable with this say you are ‘having a break from drinking’. Pacing your drinking can be helpful to reduce drinking, try having a non-alcohol drink in between drinks.

“I drink because I am bored”

If you find you are drinking because you do not have anything to do try and think about other hobbies or interests you might be able to start to keep your mind and body active.

“I drink because it helps me sleep”

Alcohol actually disrupts our sleep. Whilst you may find getting to sleep a little easier you are not getting good quality sleep. If sleep is a problem for you consider looking at your lifestyle to see if there are things you could change to help you sleep. For example reducing caffeine intake, particularly after 6pm, think about using relaxation techniques to help you to relax before bed.

You might also find it helpful to think about what you might miss about drinking alcohol. Considering this will enable you to come up with ideas about how you can still have these benefits without the health risks.

One example is

“I will miss socialising”

Socialising is important, seeing our friends can lift our mood. Think about other social activities you can do, going to the cinema, bowling, or something more adventurous. Ask your friends what they would like to try. If you feel comfortable speaking to your friends, tell them about what you are doing and they may have lots of ideas of other activities you can do together.

Write down the top three things that you think you will miss about drinking or drinking less

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Planning to manage sticking points

Acknowledging the difficulties you might face when reducing or stopping drinking allows you to make a plan to help you stay focused on your goal. The table below allows you to look at your

triggers and think about an alternative, there are some examples included. Use the space to think about your own triggers and what you could do instead of drinking alcohol.

Trigger	Activity
Stress	<i>Plan a relaxing activity following a stressful situation</i>
Low mood	<i>Exercise can help naturally lift the mood</i>
Trouble sleeping	<i>Relaxation can help to reduce worry at night time if this is stopping you from sleeping</i>

Trigger	Activity

We have looked at the reasons why you might want to change your drinking habits, and you have had a chance to look at some of the difficulties you may experience and how you can

respond to these difficulties. In the next section we will look at strategies to help you reduce your alcohol consumption and to develop alternative coping strategies.

Part 4: Strategies for taking control of unhelpful drinking

Plan enjoyable activities

We all have to do things we don't enjoy or we find difficult so it's important that we plan enjoyable activities. Make a list of activities you enjoy this could be things you have stopped doing or might be doing less of.

.....

.....

.....

.....

Pleasurable and enjoyable activities often get forgotten about when we are busy and get stuck in a routine. Planning how these activities can fit into your schedule can help you to make sure they are not forgotten. You might find it helpful to use the diary on the next page to plan how the activities you have listed might fit into your routine. To start, fill in your routine activities (for example work, childcare, housework) then think about enjoyable activities and try and create a mix of each.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Morning							
Afternoon							
Evening							

Look after your physical health

Exercise is often referred to as a natural antidepressant as it releases endorphins which make us feel good. Exercise can include walking to the shops to going to the gym. It is important that you stick to exercises that you are comfortable with and are able to do, if you are thinking about starting a new type of exercise it is advisable to speak to your GP. If you find exercise difficult due to your skin

condition consider asking your doctor for advice on what type of exercise would be easier for you. For example swimming puts less pressure on your joints and keeps you feeling cooler. Pilates and some styles of yoga are good exercises that do not cause you to sweat but help with your fitness, breathing and flexibility.

Relaxation

Relaxation can be helpful to reduce physical symptoms of stress such as tension in the muscles, or racing thoughts. Relaxation can involve putting on some gentle music, closing our eyes and focusing on our breath, or using guided meditations which involve listening to a tape and following the instructions on where to focus your attention. Whatever works best for you is fine, each individual is different. It is important to remember that relaxation is a skill, it is not something that comes first time (unless you are very lucky) and to get the full benefits it is advised that you practice regularly at times that fit in with your lifestyle.

Breathing exercises

Often if we feel stressed and anxious we take short sharp shallow breathes which is not as effective in helping reduce physical symptoms of anxiety as when we breathe from our diaphragms, rather than with the chest muscles. Here are some exercises which you can use yourself or use with others who are noticing anxiety.

Relaxation exercises

1. First of all sit comfortably, if you are pacing or walking around this will further raise your heart rate and breathing find somewhere to sit down.
2. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen (belly button!) and take some deep breaths. Practice so that the hand on your tummy is going out when you breathe in and moves more than the one on your chest.
3. Breathe out more slowly than you breathe in and take a short pause before you breathe in again.

Take a deep slow breath in and hold for 5 seconds, feel your hand on your tummy rise as you do this. Breathe out slowly to the count of 5, and repeat. Make each breath very slow and steady. When breathing out you are trying to get the air from your lungs. If you are out in public you may prefer not to put your hands on your chest and tummy, you can count in your head and no one will notice.

It is important to remember with any breathing exercises that we have to practice and it is the repetition that is key to helping us relax, just doing one or two cycles of the breathing won't be as helpful as continuing until you feel your body relaxing.

Support from others

It can be difficult but letting loved ones know that you are planning to reduce or stop drinking alcohol can be very helpful. It lets people know when you might be finding things difficult and they can support you at difficult times.

Part 5: Forming a plan

In this leaflet we have looked at identifying drinking problems, looking at triggers and how you might manage difficulties. You have been introduced to a range of techniques which people have found useful when stopping or reducing drinking. Now it is time to put together a plan for when you stop or reduce drinking. You might wish to use the guide below to help you.

I plan to start reducing my alcohol intake on.....(date)

My goal is to

(some examples include: not drink during the day, not drink when alone, not drink Monday-Friday)

.....
.....

My support network (people who I feel I can talk to and are supportive of me)

.....
.....

Trigger situations (times I think I will find challenging when stopping or reducing my drinking)

.....
.....

Strategies I can use for managing difficulties (think about some of things you have read in this leaflet that you think might be helpful)

.....
.....

Authors :

Kerry Montgomery; Dr Andrew Thompson, University of Sheffield. 2014

Further reading

Details of organisations and information you may find helpful for advice and support on stopping or reducing your drinking.

Book: *Overcoming problem drinking* by Marcantonio Spada.

Advice and information on alcohol and staying healthy

<http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/alcohol/pages/alcoholsupport.aspx>

<https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/understand-your-drinking/is-your-drinking-a-problem/alcohol-support-services>

Alcoholics anonymous

<http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/>

<http://www.al-anonuk.org.uk/>

For family and friends of people with alcohol problems

Self-help information

<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/addiction/alcohol-addiction-treatment-and-self-help.htm>

<http://www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/leaflets/Alcohol%20and%20You%20A4%202013.pdf>

<http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/substancemisuse.htm>

<http://www.mind.org.uk/>

www.samaritans.org.uk

Telephone: 08457 90 90 90 (24 hours a day)

Provides confidential emotional support to people experiencing distress, including but not limited to thoughts of suicide. You can contact the Samaritans by email or phone 24 hours a day. More information is available on the website.