

AMA Healthier Life Steps™

A physician-patient alliance for a longer, healthier life

Action plan for reducing risky drinking

The goal

For adults who choose to consume alcohol, moderation—as defined by the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005*—means drinking up to one drink per day for women or two drinks per day for men. The recommended *limits* for number of drinks:

- On any *day*, never more than 3 for women or 4 for men
- In a typical *week*, no more than 7 for women or 14 for men.

Some people shouldn't drink at all, including:

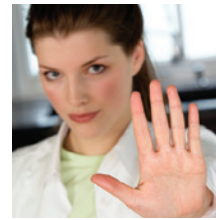
- Women who are or are trying to become pregnant
- People planning to drive or engage in other activities requiring alertness and skill (such as driving a car or using machinery)
- People taking certain over-the-counter or prescription medications
- People with medical or psychiatric conditions caused by or that can be made worse by drinking
- Recovering alcoholics or those with an alcohol use disorder
- Anyone younger than age 21

Getting ready

You indicated that you're ready to change your use of alcohol.

1. First, try to be more specific about where you would like to focus.
Check as many of the following concerns that you think apply to you.

- I would like to cut down on my drinking for my health.
- Drinking interferes with my sleeping.
- Drinking interferes with taking care of myself.
- I think I drink too often.
- When I drink:
 - I drink too much.
 - I don't feel good.
 - I get hangovers.
 - I miss important deadlines or activities.



- I do risky, sometimes dangerous things when I drink, or I do something I normally wouldn't want to do when I am not drinking, such as:
 - Drive after drinking
 - Hurt myself
 - Get into arguments or fights
 - Have unplanned or unprotected sex
 - Do something foolish and embarrassing to my partner afterwards
- My family or friends make negative comments about my drinking, or how I behave when I drink.
- Someone has commented that they are concerned about my drinking.
- Some other problem (*Write in whatever else is a concern for you about alcohol.*)

2. In thinking about these concerns, indicate those most important to you. Check as many as apply. Circle the one you would like to address first.

- Reduce the amount I drink
- Reduce how often I drink
- Reduce the problems that occur when I drink
- Change the situations in which I drink (e.g., where I drink, certain types of activities, places I drink)

3. Set a goal—a step you would like to take or how you would like things to be in the future. Write down your goal and be clear about it. Write your goal under Taking Action below. Here are some examples:

- I will cut down on my drinking by spacing my drinks and never drinking more than 3 or 4 on one occasion.
- I will avoid drinking when...
- I will avoid drinking with...
- I will never drive after I have had more than one drink.
- I will not drink on an empty stomach.
- I will quit drinking altogether.



Taking Action

Whatever your goal, make a plan that is detailed and that you're willing and able to follow. Set a date for when you're going to start.

- My goal is to:

- Some things I will do to reach this goal:

- I will start on (set the date):

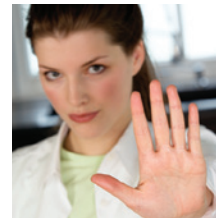
- The reasons I want to reach this goal: *(Use these as reminders of why you have this goal.)*

- Of the people around you, who could help you stick to your plan and support your efforts? Tell them about your plan and why it is important to you. Talk to them about how they might help. The person(s) who can help me are:

Track your efforts and achievements on your Progress Tracking Calendar.

A few more notes:

- If you cannot stick to your plan, talk to your doctor or the office staff about it so, together, you can figure out what to do next.
- If you have tried to reduce or stop drinking before and have had difficulty, realize that this is a process of change, and you need to keep trying.
- If you continue to have difficulty cutting down or stopping, ask your doctor to refer you to other professionals for extra help.
- Some people find that they need some additional help. Don't be afraid to ask. Your behavior is both smart and courageous when you ask for assistance to get healthy.



Keep going

Tips for cutting down on drinking*

Small changes can make a big difference in reducing your chances of having alcohol-related problems. Here are some strategies to try. Choose one or two strategies to try the first week; add others the following week.

■ Keeping track

Keep track of how much you drink. Find a way that works for you, such as a 3x5-inch card in your wallet, check marks on a kitchen calendar, or your PDA. Noting each drink before you drink will help you slow down when needed.

■ Counting and measuring

Know the standard drink sizes so you can count your drinks accurately. One standard drink is 12 ounces of regular beer, eight to nine ounces of malt liquor, five ounces of table wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof spirits.

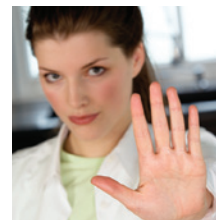
Measure drinks at home. Away from home, you may have difficulty estimating the number of standard drinks in a single mixed drink made with hard liquor or wine or beer mixed with other ingredients. To keep track, try asking the server or bartender about the recipe. Depending on factors like the type of spirits and the recipe, a mixed drink can contain the equivalent of from one to three or more standard drinks.

■ Setting goals

Decide how many days a week you want to drink, and how many drinks you will have on those days. A good idea is to have some days when you don't drink. Drinking within the limits listed below reduces the chances of having an alcohol use disorder and related health problems. Depending on your health status, your doctor may advise you to drink less or not drink at all.

- For healthy men up to age 65 years
 - No more than four drinks on any one day AND
 - No more than 14 drinks in a week
- For healthy women up to age 65 years
 - No more than three drinks on any one day AND
 - No more than seven drinks in a week
- For healthy men and women over age 65 years
 - No more than one drink on any one day

*Adapted from National Institutes of Health Publication No. 07-3769



Alcohol's effects depend on lots of different factors—your body weight, how fast and how much you drink, medications you take, gender, mood, age, health conditions, even your environment at the time. What may be low risk drinking for someone else may be harmful for you.

Factors for success

■ Pacing and spacing

When you do drink, pace yourself. Sip slowly. Have no more than one drink with alcohol per hour. Start with a non-alcoholic drink. Alternate “drink spacers”—non-alcoholic drinks such as water, soda or juice—with drinks containing alcohol. If you're thirsty, have a non-alcoholic drink.

Listen to the warning signs of intoxication—feeling lightheaded, feeling a loss of control, feeling clumsy, having trouble speaking. The more intoxicated you become, the less likely you will be able to control your drinking. Pay attention to these warning signs and use them as triggers to say you've had enough.

■ Including food

Don't drink on an empty stomach. Have some food before and while you drink so the alcohol will be absorbed more slowly into your system. But avoid salty foods and snacks. They will make you thirsty and want to drink more.

■ Avoiding “triggers”

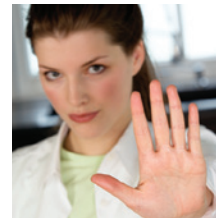
What triggers your urge to drink? If certain people or places make you drink even when you don't want to, try to avoid them. If certain activities, times of day or feelings trigger the urge, plan what you'll do instead of drinking. If drinking at home is a problem, keep little or no alcohol there.

■ Planning to handle urges

When an urge hits, consider the following options. Remind yourself of your reasons for changing. Talk it through with someone you trust. Get involved with a healthy, distracting activity. “Urge surf”—instead of fighting the feeling, accept it and ride it out, knowing that it will soon crest like a wave and pass.

■ Knowing your “no”

You're likely to be offered a drink at times when you don't want one. Have a polite, convincing “no, thanks” ready. The faster you can say “no” to these offers, the less likely you are to give in. If you hesitate, it allows time to think of excuses to accept the drink.



■ **Additional tips if you want to quit drinking**

If you want to quit drinking altogether, avoiding triggers, planning to handle urges and knowing your ‘no’ can help. In addition, you may wish to ask for support from people who might be willing to help, such as a spouse or non-drinking friends. Joining Alcoholics Anonymous or another mutual support group is a way to acquire a network of friends who have found ways to live fulfilling lives without alcohol.

If you're dependent on alcohol and decide to stop drinking completely, do not go it alone. Sudden withdrawal from heavy drinking can cause dangerous side effects such as seizures. See a doctor to plan a safe recovery.

Useful resources

■ **“How to Cut Down on Your Drinking”**

An online brochure with tips about cutting down and forms to help you track your drinking

- <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/handout.htm>

■ **Additional pamphlets about alcohol problems, cutting down, alcoholism in the family, alcohol and pregnancy, and which medicines are harmful to mix with alcohol are available (in English and Spanish) at:**

- <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/Publications/PamphletsBrochuresPosters/English/>

■ **Join Together at the Boston University School of Public Health offers a free alcohol consumption assessment tool to help you to determine if your drinking is likely to be harmful and to decide what to do.**

- www.AlcoholScreening.org

■ **For local help for you or a family member:**

- Check the Yellow Pages under “alcoholism” for treatment programs and self-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous.
- Contact local health and social service departments for help in finding assistance.
- Check the national Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator – <http://dasis3.samhsa.gov/>