

Strategies for Cutting Down

Small changes can make a big difference in reducing your chances of having alcohol-related problems. Here are some strategies to try. Check off some to try the first week, and add some others the next.

Keeping track

Keep track of how much you drink. Find a way that works for you, such as a 3x5" card in your wallet, check marks on a kitchen calendar, or a personal digital assistant. If you make note of each drink before you drink it, this 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, 8 to 9 ounces of malt liquor, 5 ounces of table wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof spirits. Measure drinks at home. Away from home, it can be hard to know the number of standard drinks in mixed drinks. To keep track, you may need to ask the server or bartender about the recipe.

Setting goals

Decide how many days a week you want to drink and how many drinks you'll have on those days. You can reduce your risk of alcohol dependence and related problems by drinking within the limits in the box to the right. It's a good idea to have some days when you don't drink.

Pacing and spacing

When you do drink, pace yourself. Sip slowly. Have no more than one drink with alcohol per hour. Alternate "drink spacers"—nonalcoholic drinks such as water, soda, or juice—with drinks containing alcohol.

Including food

Don't drink on an empty stomach. Have some food so the alcohol will be absorbed more slowly into your system.

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 these options: Remind yourself of your reasons for changing. Or talk it through with someone you trust. Or get involved with a healthy, distracting activity. Or "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 you time to think of excuses to go along.

Additional tips for quitting

If you want to quit drinking altogether, the last three strategies can help. In addition, you may wish to ask for support from people who might be willing to help, such as a significant other or nondrinking friends. Joining Alcoholics Anonymous or another mutual support group is a way to acquire a network of friends who have found ways to live without alcohol. If you're dependent on alcohol and decide to stop drinking completely, don't go it alone. Sudden withdrawal from heavy drinking can cause dangerous side effects such as seizures. See a doctor to plan a safe recovery.

MAXIMUM DRINKING LIMITS FOR HEALTHY ADULTS*

For healthy **men up to age 65**—

- no more than **4** drinks in a **day**
AND
- no more than **14** drinks in a **week**

For healthy **women** (and healthy **men over age 65**)—

- no more than **3** drinks in a **day**
AND
- no more than **7** drinks in a **week**

* Depending on your health status, your doctor may advise you to drink less or abstain.