Alcohol: standard drinks and low-risk limits

Facts about standard drinks and low-risk limits in Ireland.

Many people drink more than they realise, because measures poured at home are bigger than pub measures and because it is easy to lose count.

What is a standard drink?

In Ireland a standard drink has about 10 grams of pure alcohol. That is roughly:

Beer or lager
A half pint of normal-strength beer

Wine
A small glass (100ml). A bottle has about seven.

Spirits
A pub measure (35.5ml)

The HSE low-risk guidelines

- No more than 11 standard drinks a week for women, and 17 for men
- Spread over the week, with two to three alcohol-free days
- No more than 6 standard drinks on any one occasion

The HSE says that no level of drinking is completely safe for health, and that the less you drink, the lower the risk. These guidelines were under review in 2026, so check hse.ie for the current figures.

Signs that drinking is becoming a problem

- [ ] Drinking more, or more often, than I mean to
- [ ] Needing more to get the same effect
- [ ] Drinking to cope with stress, sleep or feelings
- [ ] Feeling guilty or secretive about it
- [ ] Other people commenting on it
- [ ] Gaps in memory after drinking
- [ ] Arguments, missed work or risks taken because of it
- [ ] Finding it hard to imagine a week without it

Alcohol and mood

Alcohol lifts mood for an hour or two, then lowers it. It worsens anxiety the next day, disrupts sleep and makes low mood harder to shift.

Important
If you drink heavily every day, do not stop suddenly. Withdrawal can be dangerous. Talk to your GP first about cutting down safely. The HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline can also advise: freephone 1800 459 459, Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 5.30pm.

What I notice about my own drinking

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Drink diary

Record every drink for one week.

Name _____ Date _____

Record every drink, as close to the time as you can. One standard drink is a half pint of beer, a small glass of wine (100ml) or a pub measure of spirits.

Day	What I drank	Standard drinks	Where and who with	What was going on (mood, reason)
Mon				
Tue				
Wed				
Thu				
Fri				
Sat				
Sun				

Total for the week	Alcohol-free days	Most in one day

What do I notice? When and why do I drink most?

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Pros and cons of changing

The good and the not so good of changing, and of staying as you are.

Name _____ Date _____

The change I am thinking about

	Staying as I am	Making the change
Good things	**What I get from things as they are**	**What I might gain**
Not so good things	**What it costs me**	**What I might lose, or what would be hard**

Looking at all four boxes, what stands out?

How important is this change to me?

0 — 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8 — 9 — 10

Not at all — Extremely

How confident am I that I could do it?

0 — 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8 — 9 — 10

Not at all — Very

The decisional balance comes from the work of Irving Janis and Leon Mann.

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My plan for cutting down

Set your limits and choose the strategies you will use to keep to them.

Name _____ Date _____

First

If you drink heavily every day, talk to your GP before cutting down. Stopping suddenly can be dangerous.

My reasons for cutting down

My limit for the week (standard drinks)	Alcohol-free days	Most on any one day

Strategies I will use

- [ ] Decide my limit before I start
- [ ] Have something to eat first
- [ ] Alternate with water or a soft drink
- [ ] Choose smaller measures or lower-strength drinks
- [ ] Start later, finish earlier
- [ ] Do not keep it in the house
- [ ] Avoid rounds, and have a reason ready for saying no
- [ ] Plan something for the times I usually drink

Situations where it will be hardest, and what I will do or say

Who knows my plan and will back me

What I will do instead to relax, reward myself or cope

How I will review it, and when

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My triggers and risky situations

List what sets off your urges and decide in advance what you will do.

Name _____ Date _____

Urges are set off by particular people, places, times and feelings. List yours, and decide in advance what you will do.

Outside triggers
Places (the pub, the kitchen, the sofa). People. Times of day. Pay day. Celebrations. Seeing or smelling it.

Inside triggers
Stress, boredom, loneliness, anger, tiredness, hunger. Feeling good and wanting to reward myself. "Just one will not hurt."

Trigger	How risky (0 to 10)	What I will do: avoid it, change it or cope with it

My riskiest time of the day or week

Who or what helps me stay on track

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Coping with cravings

Three steps for getting through a craving: delay, distract, decide.

Name _____ Date _____

A craving feels urgent, but it passes. Most peak and fade within 20 to 30 minutes, whether or not you act on them.

1. Delay	Tell yourself: "Not now. I will wait 20 minutes and see." Set a timer.
2. Distract	Do something that takes attention and, ideally, moves your body or gets you out of the room.
3. Decide	When the timer goes, check the urge. Remind yourself why you are doing this. Then choose.

What works for me

Things I can do for 20 minutes

- ☐ A walk
- ☐ Ring someone
- ☐ Cook
- ☐ A shower
- ☐ Tidy
- ☐ A game

What I will remind myself

My reasons. What happened last time.

What makes cravings worse

- ☐ Being hungry, tired or thirsty
- ☐ Being around it
- ☐ Arguing with the craving
- ☐ Telling myself "just one"
- ☐ Stress with no outlet
- ☐ Too much unplanned time

My riskiest times, and what I will have ready

Cut along the dashed lines. Keep a card in your wallet or phone case.

Craving plan

Delay 20 minutes. Distract. Decide.
It is a wave and it will pass.

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My reasons

Why I am doing this

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What to do after a slip

Why one slip does not have to become a relapse, and what to do next.

Almost everyone who changes a habit slips at some point. A slip, or lapse, is a single return to the old behaviour. A relapse is going back to the old pattern. One does not have to lead to the other.

How a slip turns into a relapse

After a slip, the thought arrives: "I have blown it. I am back to square one. I may as well carry on." Shame and hopelessness follow, and the old habit is the quickest way to escape those feelings. That reaction does more damage than the slip did.

Thinking that leads to relapse

- "I have ruined everything."
- "I obviously cannot do this."
- "I am weak."
- "I may as well keep going."

Thinking that gets you back on track

- "I slipped. That is common."
- "One slip does not wipe out my progress."
- "What led up to this?"
- "My next choice is what matters."

What to do after a slip

1. **Stop.** As soon as you notice. You do not have to finish the bottle, the packet or the evening.
2. **Get out of the situation** if you can.
3. **Talk to yourself kindly.** As you would to a friend.
4. **Tell someone** who supports you.
5. **Work out what happened.** What was the trigger? What was I feeling? What did I tell myself?
6. **Adjust the plan.** What would help next time?
7. **Start again straight away.** Not on Monday.

My slip plan

The first thing I will do

Who I will contact

What I want to say to myself

The "what the hell" effect is known as the abstinence violation effect, described by Alan Marlatt and Judith Gordon.

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