

Factsheet: Alcohol

Working in the legal profession can be stressful and well paid, a combination that leaves some lawyers with both the reason and the means to drink. While having a drink in itself is not an issue, if you were to answer 'yes' to two or more of the following statements, you could have an issue with alcohol:

- ▶ I go out intending to have just one or two drinks, but then don't seem to be able to stop
- ▶ I've tried to cut down a couple of times: I managed a whole week once
- ▶ I sometimes feel guilty about my drinking, and about the effect it has on other people
- ▶ Other people sometimes comment on how much I drink. Why can't they mind their own business?
- ▶ I have a couple of glasses before I go out, in case there's not enough when I get there
- ▶ I always feel better if I have a drink fairly early in the day, just to steady me
- ▶ I know I'm not an alcoholic because I don't drink spirits / I'm never drunk / I don't drink as much as some other people

Drinking too much?

Most of us know about the dangers of alcohol. It can seriously damage your health, personal life and the lives of those around you. It is a major cause of coronary heart disease, many different cancers, liver disease (especially cirrhosis), pancreatitis, memory loss, and depression. Alcohol is also a factor in family and relationship breakdown, and can cause career problems. The recommended safe limit per week is 14 units for men and women, and should be consumed over the course of a week. For guidance a single shot of spirits is 1 unit, a small glass of wine 1.5 units and a pint of lower strength beer 2 units.

Tips

- ▶ Keep a diary. Write down how much you drink each day, in what circumstances, and how it makes you feel. After a couple of weeks, analyse it: look for patterns and, overall, be honest with yourself
- ▶ See your GP and explain honestly how much you are drinking
- ▶ Talk to your family, friends and/or colleagues and ask for their help. The chances are that they will be happy to support you
- ▶ Avoid drinking environments. Keep out of the pub. Go to a coffee shop or the cinema instead
- ▶ Find a new hobby or interest, and put time and energy into that
- ▶ Be creative about what you drink. Try exotic fruit juices, smoothies or non-alcoholic cordials
- ▶ Find a buddy to cut down drinking with you

Help available

It is important to be frank with medics about your alcohol consumption to ensure a safe detox. If you have an alcohol dependency it is unwise to detox unsupervised.

Controlled drinking programmes

Controlled drinking programmes are available which generally involve working with professional staff, including a keyworker, who will discuss your drinking with you, suggest strategies, and set reasonable goals. Counselling may be recommended and / or drugs prescribed to help reduce cravings or counter the effects of alcohol. Many people prefer a controlled drinking programme to abstinence.

Counselling

This involves sessions with a trained counsellor, who may use various techniques such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). You will be encouraged to examine the reasons why you drink, the feelings you may be trying to suppress, and to discuss the effect drinking is having on your life.

Alcoholics Anonymous

AA is the world's largest alcohol recovery programme. It is independent of any outside organisation, is free, and confidentiality is guaranteed. AA meetings take place across the country, and the advice is to attend daily for the first three months. Some people worry that they will run into people they know at meetings, but everyone is there for the same reason, and they will not tell anyone that you were there. However, you can attend meetings in another area if you prefer.

In-patient treatment

In-patient treatment, supplemented by regular follow-ups and AA meetings, is effective, however there are considerable costs involved. Referral can be through your GP, or you can phone the treatment centre yourself. The first step is medically supervised detoxification, which can take two weeks, followed by meetings and out-patient appointments.

Staying sober

Achieving sobriety is the first step on a lifelong path. Most alcohol experts have found that once the addiction 'switch' is thrown 'on' it rarely returns 'off', even after years of abstinence. If you start to drink again, research suggests you will not start afresh but from when you stopped drinking. This is why alcoholics in treatment call themselves 'recovering alcoholics'. They can never safely return to even moderate social drinking.

"I had spoken to Victor [a LawCare supporter] on the phone. He came to visit me at the treatment centre a couple of times a week. It was tough, but he kept encouraging me to stick it out. He'd been an alcoholic himself. He'd lost his family and his job too, but now after giving up alcohol he was married again and a partner in a well-respected firm. Whenever I feel weak, I phone Victor." LawCare Helpline Caller

Top tips from alcoholics in recovery

- Avoid environments where drinking alcohol is encouraged or part of the culture
- You may need to lose contact with certain people. Your real friends will support you
- Think 'HALT+B'. Don't allow yourself to get **H**ungry, **A**ngry, **L**onely, **T**ired and **B**ored
- Don't think about never drinking again. Just give up for one day, each day
- Make full use of your AA sponsor/LawCare peer supporter or a close and understanding friend. Phone or call whenever you are feeling weak or vulnerable
- Accept relapses as just that. A one-off blip, not the end of the road to your new life. Start again the next day
- Look after yourself physically
- If you can, let those around you know you are in recovery and that you shouldn't be offered alcohol. If you prefer, use an excuse to explain why you don't drink: "I'm on antibiotics", "I'm driving"