

Alcohol and calories

Unhealthy weight gain is a concern for many of us in the UK, and alcohol is high in calories. How can we make healthy choices when it comes to including alcohol in our diets?

Among adults who drink, alcohol accounts for somewhere between 4% and 10% of our total calorie intake. For those of us who are watching our weight, reducing how much alcohol we drink is one way to manage the number of calories we consume.

Research has shown that the general population has a relatively poor awareness of the number of calories in their drinks. A survey of over 2,000 UK adults in 2014 showed that over 80% of people did not know or underestimated the number of calories in a large glass of wine, and over 60% of people did not know or underestimated the number of calories in a pint of lager.¹

This situation is not helped by the fact that many alcohol producers do not list on their packaging the number of calories in their drinks.²

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How many calories are there in alcoholic drinks?

The recommended daily calorie intake for a man is around 2,500 calories (kcal) and for a woman around 2,000, although these values can vary depending on things like age, weight, and fitness levels.³

One gram of alcohol contains seven calories (7kcal), compared with 9kcal per gram for fat, and 4kcal per gram for carbohydrate and protein. One unit of alcohol contains eight grams or 10ml of alcohol, which provides 56kcal. However, other ingredients in alcoholic drinks, such as sugar, cream and fruit juice, can add more calories.

The table below provides an estimate of the total calories found in different types of alcoholic drinks. Use the unit calculator on our website to find the number of units and calories in your favourite drink.

Type of drink	Size	Alcohol by volume (ABV)	Units	Calories (kcal)
Standard glass of wine	175ml	12%	2.1	158
Large glass of wine	250ml	12%	3.0	225
Beer, lager, cider	Pint	5.2%	3.0	222
Spirits (neat)	25ml	40%	1.0	50

Watching your intake

Many of us often forget to include alcoholic drinks when thinking about how healthy our diet is. It is easy for calories from alcohol to add up quickly and unnoticed.⁴ Alcohol is also an appetite stimulant, which can lead to overeating at mealtimes and late at night.

To provide all the nutrients needed to maintain health and reduce the risk of disease, a healthy balanced diet containing a variety of foods is needed. Alcoholic drinks lack most essential nutrients and vitamins, so if alcohol is providing many or most of the calories in the diet then there is a risk of nutritional deficiencies.

To achieve and maintain a healthy weight it is best to moderate our alcohol intake. Drinking alcohol rather than eating to prevent putting on weight should be avoided.

Tips for healthier drinking

It's important to remember that there's nothing wrong with calories. They provide the energy our bodies need to function. However, we all need to moderate our alcohol intake as part of staying healthy, both to ensure that we're not consuming too many calories, and to reduce our risk of other alcohol-related harm like cancers, liver disease and mental health problems.

A good way of reducing how much alcohol you drink is try taking days off drinking or alternating between alcoholic and alcohol-free drinks on a night out. You could also download our free app, Try Dry, to help you track your drinking and cut down at alcoholchange.org.uk/app.

www.alcoholchange.org.uk

1 RSPH (2014) Increasing awareness of 'invisible' calories from alcohol, available at <https://www.rsph.org.uk/uploads/assets/uploaded/979245d2-7b5d-4693-a9b3fb1b98b68d76.pdf>

2 See <http://ahauk.org/our-right-to-know-2018/>

3 See <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/start-the-nhs-weight-loss-plan/>

4 Dennis, E.A., Flack, K.D. and Davy, B.M. (2009) Beverage consumption and adult weight management: A review, *Eating Behaviors*, Volume 10, Issue 4, pp 237-246.

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