

## Are you a risky drinker?

**So you like a glass or two - sometimes a few too many. You could be on the brink of an alcohol problem. But changing your habits can be easier than it sounds, says Hugh Wilson**

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My name is Hugh, and I am a risky drinker. There are those who need a drink in the morning to ward off the worst effects of last night's hangover, and there are those who never drink beyond recommended limits. Between them lies a grey area, occupied - according to recent reports - by anywhere between a quarter and a third of us.

We are not dependent on alcohol, we don't use it as an excuse to fight or thieve, and we can take a few weeks off in January. Our drinking doesn't obviously affect our jobs or private lives, and many of us have no idea that our relationship with alcohol is in any way problematic. Nevertheless, in the terminology of the current alcohol panic, we are "risky" drinkers.

This is because we binge, or drink something every day, or regularly stray over the line (14 units for women per week, 21 for men) that divides safe and unsafe drinking. I haven't thrown up drunk, fallen over in a kebab shop or been unable to recall details of a night for years, but according to agencies like Alcohol Concern, that's no reason for self-congratulation. "One in three men and one in five women exceed guidelines," says Alcohol Concern's Helen Symons.

Which is why risky drinkers are the focus of a campaign of information and intervention. The idea is to stop people without a serious problem sliding into a dependency.

The Government is keen on a strategy of "brief interventions", whereby doctors or nurses offer half-hour counselling sessions to those they identify as potentially problematic drinkers. Alcohol Concern offers an online "Down Your Drink" programme. Cognitive behaviour therapy is also proving effective, and research from Australia suggests that up to 50 per cent of people on controlled-drinking courses reduce their intake to low-risk levels.

Experts say that the fact my drinking has started to niggle is telling. Or, to be more precise, that it has started to niggle my partner, who then niggles me. As a result, over the past couple of years I've cut down the frequency of my sessions, the quantity I put away, and the alcohol content of what I drink. I rarely overstep recommended limits. So can a few pints on a Friday night really be risky drinking?

"Yes," says Professor Sitharthan Thiagarajan. He runs the world's first CBT-based correspondence course in controlled drinking in Australia. "Binge-drinking is risky drinking. Broadly speaking, the definition includes drinking too much whether you do it frequently or not, because both can place you at increased risk."

The "Down Your Drink" programme lasts six weeks. Sue Craufurd, a cognitive behavioural therapist in Edinburgh, says that often one session with a GP, therapist or other health professional is enough to provoke change.

So how easy is it to become a low-risk drinker? I set myself a limit (six units), told friends I would not be joining rounds (so that I wouldn't drink to "keep up"), and deliberately missed my train (so my first drink would be half an hour later than usual). I had lined my stomach, and taken just enough money to rule out a taxi home.

Some of it was easy. I happily drank weaker bitter over strong lager. I sipped glasses of water between proper drinks (though only once instead of a proper drink), and I replaced pints with halves a couple of times. By last orders I'd downed three pints and two halves, or eight units. That's two more than planned, but three less than the week before. And although it still constitutes a binge, I'd achieved a painless reduction at the first attempt.

Will I stick to it? Only time will tell, but instant gratification is the best way to reinforce a lesson, and the next morning was the first in years that I'd felt good after a proper night out. So much so that I rewarded myself that evening with a couple of glasses of decent red wine. After all, they do say it's good for the heart.