

How to Stop Drinking Alcohol for Good with These 8 Scientific Tips

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How to Stop Drinking Alcohol for Good (Backed by Science)

There's a worldwide epidemic on our hands, and it's at the bottom of your wine glass. The World Health Organization (1) estimates that nearly three million deaths each year are related to alcohol use.

The National Health Service (NHS) produced its own statistics in 2018 (2) which showed a rise in the death toll due to alcohol; an 11% increase since 2006. If there is ever a good excuse to stop drinking, this is it!

We have reviewed the literature to provide you with evidence-based information about how to best stop drinking.

Before we dive into the article, let's establish if you as the reader (or anyone you may know) have potential problems with alcohol. The NHS (3) recommends not drinking more than 14 units of alcohol a week.

A unit is roughly equivalent to just less than a small glass of wine, a single small shot of spirits or half a pint of a beer/cider. You could be abusing alcohol if you drink more than this, or by answering affirmatively to any of the following in the **CAGE** questionnaire (3):

1. You feel you need to **C**ut down on your drinking.
2. You get **A**nnoyed if other people criticize your drinking.
3. You feel **G**uilty about your drinking.
4. You need an **E**ye-opener first thing in the morning to get rid of a hangover.

If any of these apply to yourself or someone you may know, then read on; these are ways to help you stop drinking for good.

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i. Understanding dependence and addiction is the first step

We have referenced this in another article on this blog, [How to Stop Drinking Alcohol for Good \(Backed by Science\)](#). Please take a moment to read through the mechanism of the reward pathway in the brain, to understand how addiction is related to a compulsive need to seek out dopamine to stimulate this reward pathway.

In summary, however, addiction is caused by **physical** changes in the brain that lead to **psychological** changes (4). These physical changes in the brain are not something that can be controlled by simply having “willpower.” The good news is that you can, so to speak, “re-programme” these changes in your brain.

The bad news? You need to commit to wanting to change. The following points in the article describe different ways that help you stop drinking.

ii. Tackle from multiple angles

An alcohol user in recovery has two broad options;

1. Medication to alleviate symptoms of withdrawal and cravings
2. Psychosocial approaches

However, it's not a one-method-fixes all approach. Remember what we just covered in the previous subsection; alcohol addiction is related to both physical **and** psychological changes.

The evidence in the NICE Clinical Guidelines (5) shows that, in general, psychosocial approaches should be offered to all individuals who misuse alcohol. For those people where such approaches have not worked or those who are mildly dependent, medication may be an add-on treatment option.

“Psychosocial approaches” refers to a broad variety of tools and therapy to help an individual abstain from alcohol. It refers to treating a person’s psychological and social issues at hand, rather than simply taking medicine to combat disease. This is offered by community groups, peer support groups and therapists.

Nonetheless, if a patient, for whatever reason, does not wish to undertake psychosocial interventions and understands the risks and implications of taking medication only, they cannot be denied this.

The bottom line, however, is the following; if you truly want to stop drinking for good, you need to take home multiple suggestions from this article rather than just one.

iii. [Changing behaviour and avoiding external temptation](#)



Changing behaviour sounds difficult and, spoiler alert, it is difficult. **Very** difficult.

We create behavioural patterns, or habits, by behaviour we choose to enforce and repeat. We can change this behaviour, of course, but often it is done best with the help of a trained professional.

Behavioural therapy is offered often in a rehabilitation (or “rehab”) setting, but can also be offered by a trained psychologist or community health worker. We encourage you to read our article [How to Help an Alcoholic - Is Alcohol Rehab Required?](#) in order to find out more information and links to various rehabilitation services.

One of the most effective interventions that can be offered by a trained professional, according to the literature, is Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which posits that even though we may not be able to change our circumstances, we can change the way we think about them (5).

It also includes strategies to prevent relapse and coping skills. It is a well-established and, most importantly, evidence-based treatment for multiple substance disorders causing a statistically significant effect on reducing substance-use rates (6). Be sure to ask your therapist or friendly professional about this therapy.

A new and emerging therapy is Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention (6), which reduces cravings by increasing a client’s awareness of external triggers to drink. After all, sometimes, we are not always aware of the situations and people that lead us to increase drinking. It also increases tolerance to these triggers.

So that, even if we are in those situations, the need to drink is lessened. Unfortunately, there have only been a few randomized controlled trials evaluating this technique to date and more research will be needed.

However, the above-mentioned principles can still be incorporated into your everyday life **without** physically attending therapy. Namely, by avoiding external triggers. In other words:

- Avoid people and situations where drinking is encouraged
- Try to start recognizing situations (and the people involved) where you are most likely to drink

[\[READ\] Treating Alcohol Addiction at Home](#)

[\[READ\] Alcohol Addiction Treatments Options](#)

iv. [Seek out peer support](#)

Don’t walk the lonely road of recovery alone. It has been proven that people who undertake alcohol abuse recovery without an adequate support system soon relapse (5). If you can think of someone who can provide you with this support, involve them in your recovery.

You have a much better chance at success, statistically speaking. Or, reach out to the following support networks:

- Self-help groups
- Couple or family therapy

An example of a well-known self-help group is Alcoholics Anonymous but there are many others that can offer help. Whilst the jury is out on some of the evidence surrounding Alcoholics Anonymous's methods (for example, its 12-step programme), the importance of a self-help group is rather the **environment** it provides, wherein assistance from peers helps to aid recovery and provide much needed mutual understanding (5). Examples of these groups in the United Kingdom can be found at [recoverystories.info](https://www.recoverystories.info).

Behavioural couples' therapy, particularly where one person has an alcohol use problem and the other does not, has been shown to reducing drinking in multiple clinical trials (5). Similarly, if there are unresolved conflicts in a family or interpersonal relationship, family therapy has also been shown to reduce drinking and alcoholism (5).

v. [Reward yourself – the right way](#)



As we previously learned in this article, alcohol use directly affects the part of the brain which makes decision related to perceived “rewards”. Thus, it stands to reason that if we change how we reward ourselves, we depend less on certain inputs like alcohol in order to create that surge of dopamine.

In counselling, motivational interviewing is the evidence-backed tool (5) which employs this exact logic in order to try empower the client to elicit change. A trained interviewer will often reframe their clients' problem in certain ways. Take a moment to think about what the following statement from a therapist implies;

“After a stressful day at work, you may need to reward yourself in the evenings.”

What does this imply?

- Alcohol can act as a reward
- **But** there are various other alternative “rewards”

Now, think about your favourite activities that help you settle down and reward yourself. Think about the activities you no longer take time to do because you are drinking instead. Are you ready to allow yourself to reward yourself with them, rather than a bottle of wine?

vi. Healthy lifestyle, healthy you



Evidence from existing studies (7) suggests that exercise is a useful adjunctive tool to help one stop drinking. Science points to a dual action of physical activity on alcoholism;

1. It may lessen the negative effects of alcoholism on health.

2. It acts centrally on the neurotransmitter and dopamine systems involved in the mechanisms of addiction.

So, we become healthier and we repair some of that physical damage done to our brains caused by drinking. However, there is no current evidence on the optimal intensity, duration, frequency and type of physical activity.

A healthy diet is also important. There is now growing research (8) which promotes a diet of the following;

- **Limiting sugar and junk food.** This is because low blood sugar/glucose induces craving for alcohol. Sugar causes your blood glucose to soar and then quickly drop, inducing cravings for more sugar and alcohol.
- **Increasing whole grains and fruit.** These digest more slowly and keep glucose levels more stable. Thus, you crave sugar and alcohol less.
- **Increasing L-glutamine-containing foods.** L-glutamine decreases cravings for alcohol as well as replacing nutrients lost because of alcohol abuse. Such foods include: almonds, Cheddar cheese, sunflower seeds, free-range poultry, low-fat yoghurt and avocado.
- **Increasing dopamine-enhancing foods.** As we know, this replaces the dopamine in our brain's reward centre and thus prevents alcohol withdrawal. Tyrosine, a dopamine precursor, is abundant in protein-rich food such as chicken, avocado and turkey. Ripe bananas, strawberries and blueberries help trigger dopamine release.

vii. Suppress withdrawal symptoms

We can suppress withdrawal symptoms effectively with prescribed medication. Remember, this is not a stand-alone treatment option.

NICE guidelines (5) support the use of the following medications:

- Acamprosate – reduces withdrawal symptoms such as anxiety and insomnia
- Naltrexone – reduces alcohol cravings
- Disulfiram – discourages drinking by making a patient feel ill after the ingestion of alcohol

NICE recommends using medication in combination with psychosocial interventions or if psychosocial interventions have failed. Acamprosate and naltrexone are generally recommended first and foremost; however, disulfiram can be offered if a patient would prefer it.

However, one needs to understand that disulfiram has harmful and unpleasant side-effects, such as the extremely unpleasant and amplified hangover effects after drinking alcohol, liver damage, skin rashes and cardiovascular problems (9). Always be sure to ask your doctor if it is the right medicine for you.

viii. Appreciating the positive health benefits

Research proves that excessive alcohol intake can cause (10):

- Liver disease
- Heart failure
- Hypertension
- Stroke
- Pancreatitis
- Increased breast and gastrointestinal cancer risk
- Neurological complications
- Unintentional injuries

The good news however is that if you quit before the onset of one of these diseases, a study has shown that there is no significant difference in number of diseases or health status between former drinkers and people who have never ingested alcohol (11). So, the sooner you stop, the more likely it is that you can prevent any further damage on your body.

Takeaway message...

At the end of the day, your biggest opponent is your own brain. Note how “brain” is mentioned rather than “mind”, as the fallacy that quitting an addiction is simply a matter of willpower must end.

Take advantage of now having the scientific knowledge behind knowing why it’s so difficult to quit; this will in turn help you replace alcohol’s positive effects and banish its negative effects. After all, there are so many other things in this world that we should be rewarding ourselves with.

Need Help?

Contact Abbeycare At Any Time Of The Day Or Night:

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WEB ENQUIRY FORM:

<https://www.abbeycarefoundation.com/contact-us>

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