

Community Pharmacy Living Well Campaign



Public Health
Agency



Health and
Social Care

June 2025

'Know your units' campaign briefing

The 'Know your units' campaign aims to increase awareness of the low risk drinking guidelines and the health risks associated with drinking alcohol in excess of these guidelines. The campaign will run in Living Well community pharmacies throughout June and July 2025.

Campaign overview

The Northern Ireland Health Survey shows that in 2023/24 almost four fifths (78%) of adults aged 18 and over reported that they drank alcohol. In 2023/24, around four fifths of males (81%) and three quarters of females (76%) were drinkers. Male drinkers (15%) were more likely than female drinkers (9%) to report drinking on three or more days per week.

Drinking prevalence tends to decrease with age, with over four fifths of those aged 18 to 54 reporting drinking alcohol, while around three quarters of those aged 55 to 74 and around three fifths of those aged 75+ do so.

In 2023/2024, over four fifths (83%) of those living in the least deprived areas were drinkers, while three quarters (76%) of those living in the most deprived areas reported drinking alcohol. This deprivation difference in drinking prevalence has been evident in most of the last 10 years.

As with most activities, drinking alcohol carries a degree of risk. The UK Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) developed guidelines to help people understand the risks alcohol may pose to their health and to help them make decisions about their consumption in light of the risks. The 'Know your units' campaign supports these guidelines, which can be viewed at www.pha.site/alcohol-CMOs-report



Alcohol-specific death statistics are published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). The most recent NISRA data is for 2023. In 2023, the total number of alcohol-specific deaths registered was 341. The 2023 total is 65.5% higher than the number registered a decade ago (206). In 2023, almost two thirds (65.4%) of the 341 deaths were male.

Between 2019 and 2023, the percentage of alcohol-specific deaths in Northern Ireland's most deprived areas (37.6%) was almost four times that of the least deprived areas (9.8%).

Target audience

The audience for this campaign is adults aged 18 and over who drink alcohol.

Campaign key messages

- To reduce the health risks caused by drinking alcohol, it is safest not to drink more than 14 units a week, as recommended by the UK CMOs.
- Understanding units is key to keeping track of how much you're drinking, so get to know how many units are in your favourite drinks.
- If you regularly drink as much as 14 units per week, it is best to spread your drinking over three or more days.
- If you wish to cut down the amount you drink, a good way to help achieve this is to have several alcohol-free days each week.
- Drinking too much can seriously affect your health. The risk of developing a range of health problems increases with the more you drink on a regular basis.
- Speak to your pharmacist or GP if you are concerned about your own or someone else's drinking.
- For more information and local services that offer help and support, visit www.drugsandalcoholni.info

Campaign materials

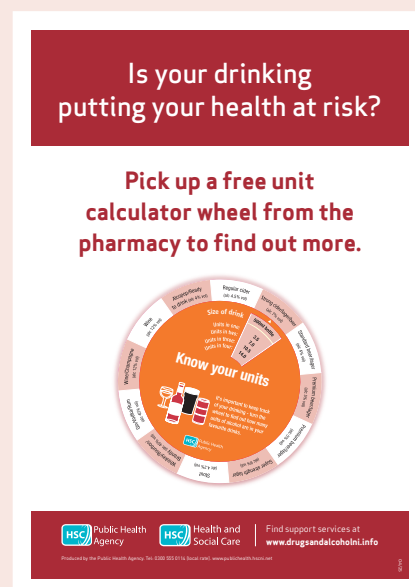
Copies of the following materials are enclosed:

2 x A3 posters:

The more you drink, the greater the risks

Is your drinking putting your health at risk?

1 x A1 poster: *The more you drink, the greater the risks*

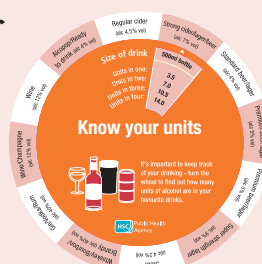


A5 leaflet:

Focus on alcohol



Unit calculator wheel



Pharmacies should display the posters and leaflets in the pharmacy within a designated health promotion display area. Posters can be rotated over the two month period, but if space permits within the pharmacy all posters may be displayed at the same time. Pharmacies must show a poster in at least one window unit for the full duration of the campaign.

Suggested activities

Use the campaign materials to highlight the key messages

The *Focus on alcohol* leaflet can be handed out to those attending the pharmacy or with prescriptions and used as a conversation starter. The unit calculator wheel can be used to show people how many units are in their favourite drinks.

Women and alcohol

Evidence suggests that many of alcohol's effects pose a greater risk to women's physical health at lower consumption levels than men. Some alcohol-related harms impact overwhelmingly on women. Drinking alcohol increases the risk of breast cancer in women. Please engage with female patients/customers and female community/support groups in your area to make them aware of the campaign and the effects of alcohol on the female body and health.

Set up a visual display

Increase understanding of units by displaying bottles, cans and glasses filled with liquid to represent popular alcoholic drinks and their units. You could also display the calories for single/multiple popular alcoholic drinks, giving food equivalents. Alcohol has a high calorie content and educating on calories is important. For more information, signpost to www.choosetolivebetter.com/content/eating-and-drinking-well

Alcohol MOT

The Alcohol MOT is designed to support those working in primary care to carry out alcohol brief interventions. There is extensive evidence to show that primary care based brief interventions are very effective at reducing drinking at both hazardous and harmful levels. The MOT enables patients to work out if they are drinking at hazardous or harmful levels, and is designed so that a practitioner can work through it with a patient, or a patient can work through it alone. Find it at <https://bso.hscni.net/living-well>

Social prescribing

Social prescribing involves putting people in touch with local networks and services, and increasing their active involvement within their local community. Social prescribing may help with alcohol misuse and it can work alongside addiction support services to aid recovery. If you know of social prescribing projects in your area, please utilise them. We would encourage pharmacies to contact projects that are relevant to the needs of the customer/patient and enquire as to how to refer and any specific referral criteria.

Signposting to self-help resources

The Public Health Agency (PHA) commissions a range of drug and alcohol support services across Northern Ireland that can support individuals and their families who are impacted by substance use. To view the self-help and family support resources visit www.drugsandalcoholni.info/self-help-tools-resources

Please be aware that the patient/customer may be seeking advice for someone else.

Training and professional development

The NI Centre for Pharmacy Learning & Development (NICPLD) offers Brief Interventions eLearning to equip healthcare professionals with the knowledge and skills necessary to deliver an effective brief intervention. A recorded webinar, Alcohol Awareness and Brief Interventions, is also available on the NICPLD website. Please note, course information for the eLearning and the recorded webinar is under review and pending updates. Any updates during the campaign period will be communicated. Visit www.nicpld.org

The PHA commissions ASCERT to deliver a range of awareness and specialist substance use courses to support the workforce develop their knowledge and skills. Visit <https://training.ascert.biz/all-courses>

Social media

For pharmacies using social media channels, there is an opportunity to let followers know the pharmacy is involved in the campaign and to promote the campaign messages. Please share the Public Health Agency's posts or create your own posts and tag the PHA, Health and Social Care NI, Community Pharmacy NI and NICPLD in your posts.

Please use the hashtags #LivingWell, #KnowYourUnits and #AlcoholFreeDays as appropriate on social media posts for this campaign.



X:

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@compharmacyni
@NICPLD1



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@publichealthni
@health_and_social_care
@compharmacyni
@NICPLD1

All Living Well materials to support this campaign can be found at
<https://bsc.hscni.net/living-well>

Questions and answers

Q: What is a unit of alcohol?

A: One unit is 10ml/8g of pure alcohol. It's not as simple as one drink, one unit. Because alcoholic drinks come in different strengths and sizes, units are a good way of telling how strong a drink is.

Q: How can I check how much I am drinking?

A: The unit calculator wheel will help you work out how many units you drink on a weekly basis or use the virtual bar at www.drugsandalcoholni.info/alcohol-units. Visit the self-help section of the website to do the alcohol test and check if your drinking is putting your health at risk.

Q: I'm trying to lose weight. I've cut out some sweets and treats during the week and will just have wine at the weekend. Will this help with my weight loss?

A: Weight for weight the alcohol in a drink contains almost as many calories as fat. You can put weight on if you drink alcohol regularly. To stop weight gain or lose weight, reduce your drinking.

Q: I'm taking medication. Can I drink alcohol?

A: There are many dangers associated with mixing alcohol and drugs. Mixing substances can increase the risk of side effects, change the effect of medications and increase the risk of overdose. You should read the Patient Information Leaflet with your medication. Ask the pharmacist, if you are unsure.

Q: Is alcohol good for the heart?

A: It was previously believed that drinking at low levels may have some benefits to the heart for men and women over a certain age. More recent evidence suggests that there most likely is no benefit.

Q: I was drinking alcohol before I knew I was pregnant. Is my baby at risk?

A: The risk of harm to the baby is likely to be low if you have drunk only small amounts of alcohol before you knew you were pregnant or during pregnancy. Now you know you are pregnant, it's best to not drink alcohol at all to keep your baby's risks to a minimum. If you are worried about alcohol use during pregnancy, talk to your doctor or midwife.

Q: I'm breastfeeding. Is it safe to drink alcohol?

A: When you are breastfeeding, traces of what you drink pass through to your breast milk. Alcohol can also affect how easily your baby feeds. While it's safer not to drink alcohol, an occasional drink (one or two units, once or twice a week) is unlikely to harm your baby. It is recommended that you wait at least two hours after having a drink before feeding.



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