

Patient information factsheet

Nutritional advice for people drinking alcohol at high levels or dependently

Eating a healthy, balanced diet is an important part of maintaining good health. If you drink alcohol at high levels or dependently then you may be at risk of becoming deficient in some of the essential nutrients, vitamins and minerals your body and brain need to function properly. This factsheet offers information on diet and nutrition and some tips for eating well which you may find helpful.

You should have received advice about the amount of alcohol you drink. If you have not received this advice, please talk to your nurse or doctor.

Dietary advice for specific groups

You will need more advice on your diet and nutrition if:

- you have eaten very little or nothing at all for five days
- you have been told by your doctor that you have scarring on your liver (cirrhosis) or advanced liver disease
- before coming into hospital, you have lost a noticeable amount of weight in a short period of time that you did not intend to lose

Let your doctor, nurse or GP know if any of the above apply to you. They will arrange a referral to your local dietitian who can give you more specialist support.

Why is a balanced diet important?

A balanced diet, containing a range of essential nutrients, vitamins and minerals, enables your body and brain to function properly, and provides energy. A diet low in essential nutrients can result in a serious condition called malnutrition, which can affect your overall health and wellbeing, as well as make you feel tired and weak. Keep in mind that eating food is as important as taking your medications.

A balanced diet contains a range of foods including:

- protein (such as meat, fish and eggs)
- carbohydrates (such as potatoes and pasta)
- fruits
- vegetables
- dairy products (such as butter, milk and cheese)

How does alcohol affect nutrition?

Alcoholic drinks contain pure alcohol, water and sugars. They provide energy but no other nutrients.

Alcoholic drinks can make you feel full up and reduce your appetite, making you feel less like eating.

Additionally, when you are drinking high levels of alcohol, the alcohol can affect how your body digests food and uses the nutrients. Reducing the amount of alcohol you drink will help improve your nutritional state, because your body will be able to use the nutrients in your food more effectively.

B vitamins

What are B vitamins?

B vitamins are found in foods such as cereals, meat, fish and nuts. They are essential for your body to function normally. If you are drinking alcohol at high levels and are not eating well, it is very likely that you will not have enough B vitamins in your body, especially B1 (thiamine).

B1 (thiamine)

Having low levels of vitamin B1 (thiamine) in your body can cause damage to your brain and nervous system, and even cause permanent brain damage.

In hospital, you may have received a yellow drip containing a liquid called Pabrinex, which contains highly concentrated B vitamins, such as thiamine. When you are back at home, you should take the tablet version of thiamine. You may have been given a prescription for this. If you have not been given a prescription for thiamine, your GP may be able to give you one.

The recommended dose of thiamine is 200 milligrams (mg) to 300mg a day. This will be prescribed as two or three smaller doses during the day. You should keep taking thiamine if you continue to drink at a high risk or dependent level. You should review the ongoing need for this with your GP.

You may also wish to buy an over-the-counter multivitamin if you are struggling to eat a balanced diet.

Advice for small appetites

If you have a small or reduced appetite, the following tips can help you ensure the food you are eating is offering you best nutritional value.

- Eat little and often – ‘grazing’ or having a small snack frequently (for example, every two hours) may be easier than trying to eat a big meal in one go.
- Remember eating something is always better than eating nothing (even if it’s not the healthiest option).
- If the idea of cooking a meal is off-putting, think of making a nutritious snack instead. For example, an omelette or a slice of toast with something on it.
- Have quick and tasty snacks prepared and ready to go so you can grab them during the day.
- Try making smoothies or milkshakes using full fat (blue top) milk – you may find having a nutritious drink easier to manage than a meal.
- If you find your appetite is better at certain times of the day, try to eat a bit extra at these times.
- Try adding ingredients that are energy dense to your meals to increase the overall calorie content without increasing the portion size. For example, sprinkling some grated cheese on your evening meal or using olive oil or butter in your meals.

Patient information factsheet

- Try to eat milky puddings such as custards and rice puddings and energy dense snacks such as toast, crumpets or a scone with butter and jam.
- Go on a weekly shop, or order online, and stock up your cupboards with your favourite foods. You will be more likely to use them if they are readily available.

Advice for eating well on a budget

The following tips can help you to eat well on a budget.

- Plan ahead. At the start of the week, write down a few meal ideas you would like to eat. Then make a shopping list.
- Stock your cupboards with plenty of tinned foods like tomatoes, chickpeas, beans, vegetables and lentils.
- Buy tinned and frozen fruits.
- Shop fruits and vegetables that are in season.
- Bulk buy foods that have a long use by date (such as cereal, oats and rice) as this can work out cheaper.
- Use any leftovers as part of another meal for lunch or dinner the following day. Alternatively, freeze any leftovers so that you can have them as a meal on a different day.
- Make some of your meals vegetarian (no meat), and add protein such as lentils and beans.
- Cook together with friends and family members.

Meal ideas

The following table may provide some meal ideas for your breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks.

Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner	Snacks
Breakfast cereal with milk	Sandwich (tuna and sweetcorn or ham and cheese)	Jacket potato, beans and cheese	Yoghurt and fruit
Two slices of toast with a banana	Creamy soup and roll or sandwich	Pasta with tomatoes, vegetables, beans and cheese	Smoothie or milkshake
Porridge oats with milk and fruit	Chicken wrap	Chicken curry	Hot chocolate or milky coffee with biscuits
Eggs on toast	Meal deal from the supermarket	Egg fried rice with vegetables	Cheese and crackers
Mushrooms and tomatoes on toast	Pasta salad	Beans on toast with cheese	Hot pudding (apple crumble and custard or rice pudding)
Omelette with cheese	Bean burrito	Cottage pie and vegetables	Crumpets or toast with butter and jam

Community dietitians

If you live in the Southampton area, your GP may refer you to the local community dietetic department. They see people outside of hospital.

Southampton community dietitians

Telephone: **023 8054 0184**

Patient information factsheet

If you live outside of Southampton, you can contact your GP to arrange a referral to your local dietitian.

Food banks

Food banks in the area offer a range of foods and other basics. You can find local food banks by checking the below websites. Alternatively, you can speak to your GP or your alcohol support worker if you are under alcohol services.

Trussell Trust: www.trusselltrust.org

Southampton City Council: <https://southamptoncitymission.co.uk/venues>

Contact us

Alcohol care team

Telephone: 023 8120 5721

Useful links

Alcohol support - Southampton City residents (SO14 to SO19)

Change Grow Live

Telephone: 023 8071 7171

Website: www.changegrowlive.org/drug-alcohol-service-southampton

Alcohol support - Hampshire residents

Inclusion

Telephone: 0300 124 0103

Website: www.inclusionhants.org

Nutrition

British Dietetic Association

Healthy eating: www.bda.uk.com/resource/healthy-eating.html

Eat well, spend less: www.bda.uk.com/resource/food-facts-eat-well-spend-less.html

Recipe ideas

BBC Good Food: www.bbcgoodfood.com/

NHS Change4Life: www.nhs.uk/change4life/recipes

Sainsbury's: <https://recipes.sainsburys.co.uk/>

Asda: <https://groceries.asda.com/recipes>

Tesco: <https://realfood.tesco.com/recipes>

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