A toast to your health?

Employees and alcohol at work

idewe
Optimising work environments
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Three sober observations about alcohol

1. Alcohol increases the likelihood of accidents
   Someone weighing 80 kg who drinks two pints in one hour has approximately 40 millilitres of alcohol in his blood. He may still drive according to the law. He does, however, already have a 40 per cent higher chance of an accident. After 4 pints (80 millilitres) the chance of an accident is already ten times higher; after six pints the likelihood is 48 times greater, and after 8 pints no less than 380 times greater.

2. Becoming sober takes time
   Alcohol is substance alien to your body. Your liver breaks down alien substances in your body. This breaking down takes time. Your liver is working for one to one and a half hours after drinking one alcoholic drink. If you ‘have drunk much in the evening, you can therefore still be drunk the following morning (number of glasses drunk x an hour and a half). You cannot shorten the breaking down time.

3. Alcohol makes you fatter
   A glass of wine puts approximately 100 calories in your body. To lose it again, an average person must jog approximately 3.5 kilometres. Calories from alcohol have the tendency to turn into abdominal fat. Alcohol also slows the breaking down of fats from food. So your body will store more fat and become fatter.

Drinking a pint or enjoying a glass of wine can be very pleasant. Drinking does not have to be a problem. Alcohol use can, however, pose a threat to your health. It can even put your safety – and that of others – in danger. This is why it is important to now and again take a look at how you are using alcohol. In this brochure we invite you to take a look at your alcohol use – and think about its effect on your workplace.
Is alcohol abuse a major problem among the working population?

Most employees are not problem drinkers. Nine out of ten employees drink moderately and in a responsible way. Five to ten per cent, however, sometimes drink too much. Their behaviour is a risk to their safety or health – and that of others. This is called occasional excessive use. A small but not insignificant part of the working population consists of chronic users. Among them the risks of problems with safety, their own health and their social environment are very high.

How much is too much?

There are generally accepted criteria that indicate how much you may drink without endangering your health. Drinking alcohol often goes together with times of relaxation and conviviality. You do not immediately need to be concerned about your alcohol use if you find yourself in the situations below:

**You are a woman and...**
- you drink a maximum of 2 normal glasses of alcohol a day;
- you do drink 3 glasses on special occasions, but that does not happen every week;
- you drink no more than 14 glasses of alcohol a week;
- you do not drink alcohol if you are pregnant, want to become pregnant or are breastfeeding.

**You are a man and...**
- you drink a maximum of 3 normal glasses of alcohol a day;
- you do drink 5 glasses on special occasions, but that does not happen every week;
- you drink no more than 21 glasses of alcohol a week.

**For men and women you also:**
- can best drink no alcohol on 2 days a week to break or prevent it from becoming a habit;
- better not drink when you are working, playing sport or driving;
- must be aware that you may not use drinking as a permanent remedy for tiredness or in response to tensions or other personal problems.
When are you dependent on alcohol?

You notice that you no longer have your alcohol use under control. You are aware that it is making you suffer. Dependence may then be emerging. Think if you drink for the taste or for the alcohol.

How is dependence identified?

✓ You always feel like alcohol and you think a lot about it.
✓ You feel better or amuse yourself better if you have had a drink.
✓ You also drink if you are alone or you also drink during the day.
✓ You can or must drink increasingly more to feel the same effect.
✓ You have already asked yourself if you should drink a little less.
✓ Other people have already mentioned your drinking.

Which aspects increase the likelihood of an alcohol problem?

Different factors particular to the person can increase the likelihood of an alcohol problem:

✓ your personality (when, for example, you try to compensate for a feeling of inferiority by drinking);
✓ your gender (women have a higher alcohol level in their blood than men after the same quantity of drink);
✓ your age (alcohol abuse is most common between 20 and 40 years of age);
✓ your state of mind (whoever is having a mental dip or is quickly fearful more readily has a drink to allay unpleasant feelings).
Factors at your workplace can also influence your alcohol use. You have a greater likelihood of developing an alcohol problem if:

- alcohol is easily available at your company;
- there are regular occasions – parties – where employees can drink a lot;
- there are no or unclear arrangements about alcohol at work.

What are the consequences of alcohol use in the short term?

Drinking alcohol has an immediate effect on your body. Alcohol arrives in the bloodstream and spreads around your body. After about 10 minutes it reaches the brain and the first effects are perceptible.

Table of the immediate effects:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>After drinking:</th>
<th>You have ... in your blood</th>
<th>And the effect is:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 to 2 glasses</td>
<td>50 millilitres</td>
<td>Your concentration level falls, you are less inhibited.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 to 5 glasses</td>
<td>100 millilitres</td>
<td>You have less control of your movements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 to 10 glasses</td>
<td>200 millilitres</td>
<td>You stumble and can no longer speak clearly; you are emotionally less stable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 to 15 glasses</td>
<td>300 millilitres</td>
<td>You barely respond to stimuli and no longer understand what is going on around you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 to 20 glasses</td>
<td>400 millilitres</td>
<td>You fall asleep and it is difficult to wake you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 to 25 glasses</td>
<td>500 millilitres or higher</td>
<td>You are in a coma. Your heartbeat and breathing can stop.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Alcohol generally has an anaesthetising effect. The short term suppression of depressive feelings, while also removing normal inhibitions. You then act more impulsively and sometimes do rash things without being able to properly estimate the seriousness of any consequences. Alcohol certainly causes damage in the long term when you systematically use alcohol to allay unpleasant feelings or complaints.

If you drive under the influence you are a danger to yourself and other road users. Driving a car is indeed a complex task that requires very many skills. Alcohol has for example the effect that:

- your eyes can less quickly follow a moving object;
- it takes longer to process information (for example traffic signs);
- you do not longer notice certain things (for example pedestrians) at all;
- your reaction speed slows;
- you overestimate your driving ability and underestimate danger so you take many more risks.

After an evening of excessive drinking you do not function at work the following day as you should. You are often still tired because of a short and poor night’s rest; you sometimes still have a hangover, and your attention and powers of concentration are weakened. Maybe you are even still under the influence. That seriously jeopardises safety at work.

What are the consequences of alcohol use in the longer term?

Drinking too much can have a harmful effect on your brain, liver, stomach, heart and blood vessels. More than three glasses of alcohol a day also increases the likelihood of cancer. The quality of your sex life can also drop sharply. Whoever drinks regularly for a longer time runs the risk of becoming dependent on alcohol, and will have to drink more and more alcohol to experience the same effect. That usually leads to the slow but steady aggravation of the drinking problem. So an alcohol problem does not originate from one day to the next.
Drinking too much obviously not only has physical consequences. Regularly being under the influence of alcohol impedes your functioning in all areas: relationships, work performance, general functioning, etc. As a result you can encounter difficulties in keeping your job or functioning normally at work. Traffic or other offences increase the likelihood that sooner or later you will come into contact with the law. You can then end up in a downward spiral.

**What are the risks of alcohol use at work?**

Occasional excessive use in the first instance means a safety problem: the risk of accidents increases. The reputation of your company can also be damaged (when, for example, you visit a client in a drunken state) and serious damage to health (for example by a higher risk of brain damage) can occur. Chronic misuse also has major consequences for work performance and the atmosphere at work – and obviously for your own health.

**A few examples of risks:**

☑ You behave inappropriately, aggressively or go too far with a colleague.
☑ You report sick more often.
☑ Your more frequent absence means colleagues have to stand in and that leads to tension in the team.
☑ After your weekend use you arrive at work on Monday less alert and sometimes still under the influence.
☑ You make mistakes at your workplace.
☑ Your safety and safety in your environment is threatened, for example at a machine, when driving a fork-lift truck or when handling chemical products.
☑ You cause a car accident under the influence.
What can you do yourself?

Can you identify with a number of characteristics of dependence? Are you starting to wonder if your alcohol use is causing problems? Then it may be necessary to take a longer look at your alcohol use. Start by better monitoring your alcohol use over a couple of weeks:

✓ for two weeks note what you drink and in which circumstances (where, with who, etc.);
✓ also write down the pleasant aspects of drinking (for example: beer is tasty);
✓ note the negative sides of drinking (for example: it is costing me a lot of money).

At the end of the two weeks decide what you want, and take account of the balance between the advantages and disadvantages. Decide whether to change something about your alcohol use. After the decision make a plan. Make a number of arrangements for yourself, for example on the date on which you are going to change your drinking habits, the time you give yourself to achieve your aim, and how you will reward yourself when you have achieved it. Also decide what the next step is if you have not achieved it. Do not just decide to drink less, make your objectives very concrete, for example: I will no longer drink when I am alone, I will not drink if I am driving, I will drink a maximum of so many glasses when I go out, I will not drink any more strong drinks, I will only drink at the weekend, etc. Because social habits play an important part in drinking behaviour, you increase your chances of success significantly if you also inform those around you of your changed drinking habits.

What if you see a colleague who seems to have a problem with alcohol?

At a given time it can be clear to every employee in a department that a colleague has an alcohol problem. This is often talked about, but not discussed with the colleague. Other colleagues take care of his or her shortcomings at work. By constantly putting his or her mistakes right you are helping neither the problem drinker nor yourself. Good colleagues dare to tell each other the truth, and do not keep beating around the bush. This is best done in a safe, confidential and inoffensive atmosphere. In this way you invite the problem drinker to look at and solve the alcohol problem at an early stage.
A few tips:

- Choose a good time to discuss the drink problem. Wait for a time when your colleague is not under the influence. Try not to show disapproval (even if you are so indignant, disappointed, insulted or angry).
- Say why you are starting the discussion (what you are concerned about or what is causing you bother). Be as concrete as possible.
- Mention the channels of help at the company that your colleague can use.
- Say what improvements you expect. Mention that you will discuss the problem with your supervisor if there is no improvement.

Who can you go to at work?

Would you like more information or to talk with someone about alcohol use? You can contact the following persons:

- the company medical officer;
- the prevention adviser psychosocial aspects;
- the personnel department or the HRM representative;
- the personnel representatives.

And away from work?

You can also contact:

- your GP;
- the drug line (VAD): 078/15 10 20.

If necessary they can refer you to more specialised staff.
Where can you find more information?

✓ www.druglijn.be
✓ www.vad.be
✓ www.boodschapineenfles.be
✓ www.drinktest.nl
✓ www.alcoholhulp.be
✓ www.aavlaanderen.org
✓ www.gezondheid.be
## Self-test

### Is your alcohol use problematic?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>How often do you drink a glass of alcohol?</strong></td>
<td>Never (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Once a month or less (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 to 4 times a month (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 to 3 times a week (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 times or more often a week (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **When you drink, how many glasses of alcohol do you drink on average?** | 1-2 (0)                                      |
|                                                                          | 3-4 (1)                                      |
|                                                                          | 5-6 (2)                                      |
|                                                                          | 7-9 (3)                                      |
|                                                                          | 10 or more (4)                               |

| **How often do you drink more than 6 glasses or more?**                 | Never (0)                                    |
|                                                                          | Less than once a month (1)                   |
|                                                                          | Monthly (2)                                  |
|                                                                          | Weekly (3)                                   |
|                                                                          | Daily or nearly daily (4)                    |

| **How often in the past year have you noticed that you could no longer stop drinking once you had started?** | Never (0)                                    |
|                                                                                                                                  | Less than once a month (1)                   |
|                                                                                                                                  | Monthly (2)                                  |
|                                                                                                                                  | Weekly (3)                                   |
|                                                                                                                                  | Daily or nearly daily (4)                    |

<p>| <strong>How often in the past year have you not done something that you wanted to because of your alcohol use?</strong> | Never (0)                                    |
|                                                                                                                                  | Less than once a month (1)                   |
|                                                                                                                                  | Monthly (2)                                  |
|                                                                                                                                  | Weekly (3)                                   |
|                                                                                                                                  | Daily or nearly daily (4)                    |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| How often in the past year did you immediately need alcohol in the morning to be able to start the day? | Never (0)  
Less than once a month (1)  
Monthly (2)  
Weekly (3)  
Daily or nearly daily (4) |
| How often in the past year have you felt guilty about your alcohol use? | Never (0)  
Less than once a month (1)  
Monthly (2)  
Weekly (3)  
Daily or nearly daily (4) |
| How often in the past year could you no longer remember something because of your alcohol use? | Never (0)  
Less than once a month (1)  
Monthly (2)  
Weekly (3)  
Daily or nearly daily (4) |
| Have you or anyone else been injured because of your alcohol use?      | No (0)  
Yes, but not in the past year (2)  
Yes, during the past year (4) |
| Has a family member, friend or doctor ever said that he/she was concerned about your alcohol use? | No (0)  
Yes, but not in the past year (2)  
Yes, during the past year (4) |

(AUDIT question list World Health Organisation)

Calculate your own score by adding up the figures for each ticked answer.
Result

0 to 7 = low
For most people this is not a problematic result. You have good drinking habits. You can best keep them by not drinking any more or often.

8 to 15 = increasing risk of accidents, damage to health and alcohol dependence
We advise you to look at your drinking behaviour now the situation is not yet too serious, and you can still relatively easily change your habits.

16 to 25 = high risk of accidents, damage to health and alcohol dependence
We advise you to look at your drinking behaviour. You can ask for advice from your company medical officer or specialised staff.

26 to 40 = very high risk of accidents, damage to health and alcohol dependence
We strongly advise you to look at your drinking behaviour. A talk with your company medical officer or specialised staff can be very useful.
For more information you can always contact your prevention advisor—company medical officer, your prevention adviser psychosocial aspects or your regional office.

Antwerpen
Tel.: 03 218 83 83
Fax 03 230 56 78
antwerpen@idewe.be

Brussel
Tel.: 02 237 33 24
Fax 02 230 05 69
brussel@idewe.be

Gent
Tel.: 09 264 12 30
Fax 09 264 12 39
gent@idewe.be

Hasselt
Tel.: 011 24 94 70
Fax 011 22 35 62
hasselt@idewe.be

Leuven
Tel.: 016 39 04 38
Fax 016 39 04 02
leuven@idewe.be

Mechelen
Tel.: 015 28 00 50
Fax 015 28 00 60
mechelen@idewe.be

Namur
Tel.: 081 32 10 40
Fax 081 30 13 71
namur@idewe.be

Turnhout
Tel.: 014 40 02 20
Fax 014 40 02 29
turnhout@idewe.be

Roeselare
Tel.: 051 27 29 29
Fax 051 27 29 59
roeselare@idewe.be