

Fancy a drink?

You can drink if you have diabetes but you need to know how to drink safely, writes **Anne Mullan**

Irish people love to drink. Birthdays, weddings, christenings, funerals, having a party, meeting old friends, celebrating the start of the weekend or commiserating the arrival of yet another Monday – we find many good reasons to enjoy a drink

So what happens if you have diabetes? Does this mean that you must sit stoically with your glass of sparkling water while everyone parties around you? Well, the happy answer to that question is no. Most people who develop diabetes can continue to enjoy having a drink. The main thing when you have diabetes is learning how to drink safely.

Alcohol and your liver

When you think of what keeps your blood sugars stable you probably think about insulin and the pancreas. What many people don't realise is that your liver also plays a vital role in keeping your blood sugars steady. One of the jobs of your liver is to keep a store of sugar in it. If your blood sugar starts to drop too low (you are going a bit hypo) your liver sends this sugar out into your blood to bring it back to normal levels.

However, the main role of your liver is to break down any food or drug that might be harmful to our systems. Now, much as we might love it, alcohol is essentially toxic to us. Because of this, as soon as we start to drink, our liver gets busy breaking down this alcohol in order to get rid of it. This is such a priority for the liver that it doesn't notice as your blood sugar starts to drop. And the more drinks you have, the less likely your liver is to notice your sugar dropping.

So how does this affect your diabetes?

If you have type 2 diabetes and are being treated with just diet alone or diet and metformin (Glucophage) after having a few drinks you might notice that your blood sugars are a bit higher than usual before going to bed (due to the sugar in the drinks); and that your blood sugars are a bit lower than usual when you wake up (due to the effects of the alcohol you've had).

However, if you have type 1 diabetes, or are taking insulin or sulphonylureas (eg Diamicron or Amaryl) for type 2 diabetes you could end up having a very serious hypo (low blood sugar). This risk of a severe hypo can last through the night and right into the next day. And the more you have to drink the more likely this is to happen. So how do you drink safely when you have diabetes?

One of the most important things when you have diabetes is recognising that heavy or binge drinking and diabetes just don't go together.

Even without diabetes, too much alcohol can cause liver damage as well as increasing our risk of developing heart disease and certain cancers. When you put diabetes in the mix, it's even more damaging.

Sensible drinking is the key and happily there is evidence to suggest that moderate amounts of alcohol can actually be good for us (though this evidence isn't strong enough to recommend that teetotallers take up drinking!). The recommendations for people with diabetes are similar to those for the rest of the population

Women

Women should not drink more than 14 units of alcohol per week and not more than 2-3 units at any one time. Fourteen units of alcohol is approximately:

- Two and a half bottles of wine

WHAT IS ONE UNIT OF ALCOHOL?

One unit of alcohol or one standard drink is the amount of a particular drink that contains 10 grams of pure alcohol.

1 unit of alcohol =

½ pint beer or lager

1 short or shot (eg. vodka, gin, whiskey, rum etc)

1 small glass of wine or ½ a small bottle (size served in pubs)

½ pint cider

1 alcopop

- Seven pints of cider, or
- 14 shorts.

Men

Men should not drink more than 21 units of alcohol per week and not more than 3-4 units at any one time. Twenty-one units of alcohol is approximately:

- 10-11 pints of beer or lager, or
- 21 shorts.

Everyone should aim to have a couple of alcohol-free days in the week. These healthy limits apply to all the population, both with and without diabetes.

www.drinkaware.ie has a standard calculator that lets you work out the number of alcohol units in what you have had to drink.

Will drinking affect my weight?

For most people with diabetes losing weight—or trying to keep it off—is a con-

stant struggle. It's easy to forget how many calories alcohol can contribute to your daily intake.

One pint Guinness or beer contains around 200 calories which is the equivalent to about three slices of bread. If you regularly have two or three pints of an evening you are getting the calories of up to an extra nine slices of bread in the day. It's no wonder the weight isn't shifting!

Some companies now do 'light' versions of their beers and lagers, for example Bud Lite, Miller Lite and Coors Lite.

Most of these have a similar alcohol content to ordinary beers and lagers but they are slightly lower in calories (about 100-110 calories per 330ml/12 oz bottle or can); compared with the standard versions (about 130-150 calories per 330ml). Not a huge difference but if you are minding every calorie you might want to try them.

For cider drinkers watching their weight it is worth trying the Bulmers Lite. This has the same alcohol content as ordinary cider, but has no sugar and contains just 78 calories per half pint compared to 115 calories for half pint of regular Bulmers.

Wines – particularly dry wines- and shorts aren't quite so high in calories at about 80 calories per small glass/measure but they add up over the week. Adding diet mixers can help you reduce the number of drinks that you are having. Sweetened shorts, for example, liqueurs, and sweetened wines and sherries are better avoided.

The main thing to remember is that all alcoholic drinks contain calories and the more you drink the more they add up. www.drinkaware.co.uk you can calculate the units of alcohol and the calories in what you've had to drink.

And finally, perhaps the most important message for all of us, with or without diabetes is: **Never Drink and Drive.**

Please note: In Ireland, it is illegal to purchase alcohol or to consume alcohol in a public place below the age of 18.

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TOP TIPS

Reduce your risk of having a hypo

For people on insulin or taking sulphonylureas (eg. Diamicon, Amaryl), it is essential that you reduce your risk of going hypo when you are drinking. This is especially important as, once you've had a few drinks, you may not notice your own hypo symptoms and the people around you may just assume that you are drunk.

Never drink alcohol on an empty stomach.

Always make sure you have something to eat before you drink. Whatever you eat must contain some form of starchy carbohydrate, for example bread, potatoes, rice or pasta.

Because most alcoholic drinks contain some sugar many people make the mistake of thinking they should eat less before drinking. The opposite is true. Though initially the carbohydrate in your drinks may cause your sugars to rise, very soon the alcohol will lower your blood sugar and so you actually need to eat more when you are having a few drinks.

Always have something to eat before you go to bed

Because your liver will keep breaking down the alcohol in your system throughout the night your sugars can keep dropping. A side effect of the alcohol may mean that you don't wake up until your blood sugar is very low. If you've been drinking you must have some form of starchy snack, for example breakfast cereal, toast or a sandwich, before you go to sleep.

Insulin and alcohol – keeping yourself safe

Binge drinking is part of the Irish youth culture. A night of Jaeger bombs, Supersplits, Mickey Finns and alcopops can add up to a huge amount of alcohol and sugar consumed in a very short space of time. This is about as bad as it gets for your diabetes as first your bloods soar with the sugar rush and then plummet due to all the alcohol. Not to mention the amount of calories you're getting!

If you're out for a night make sure that you've eaten beforehand. As mentioned never drink on an empty stomach.

When you are out try keeping to longer drinks with a lower alcohol and sugar content such as:

- Beers or lagers
- Spirits with plenty of diet mixers
- Wine spritzed with soda water or diet lemonade.

Avoid using high sugar energy drinks (like Red Bull) or sweet juices (like pineapple or orange juice) as a mixer. Having a non-alcoholic, sugar-free drink every second drink, for example fizzy water, diet coke or diet lemonade, is also very helpful.

- Make sure your friends or the people you are drinking with know that you have diabetes, that they know what your hypo symptoms are and know how to treat them.
- It's essential that you carry (or better still, wear) some form of ID to alert people to your diabetes.
- If you are making a big night of it and heading for a club you'll probably also need to eat throughout the evening.
- Most importantly don't forget your starchy bedtime snack. If you've nothing in the house, a burger or chips or kebab on the way home is better than nothing.
- Keep a check on your blood sugars. At the very least, check them before you go out and before you go to bed.