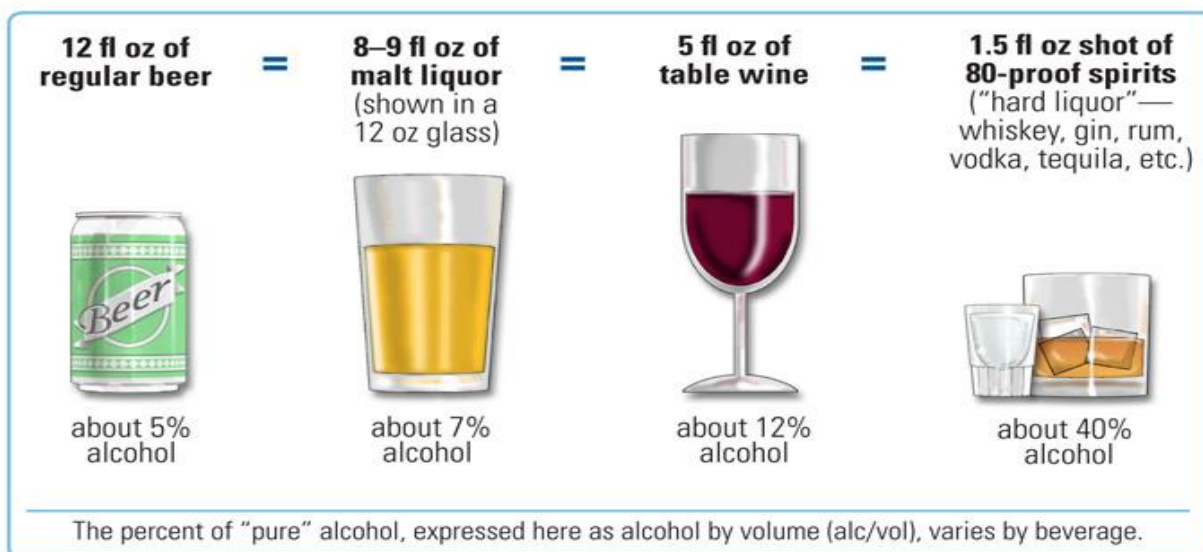


## A Guide to Low-Risk Drinking

### What is Low Risk Drinking?

Scientific evidence indicates that the risk of harm from drinking alcohol increases significantly when people consume more than 2 drinks on most occasions, 10 per week for women or more than 3 drinks on most occasions, 15 per week for men. Because different types of alcoholic beverages contain different amounts of alcohol, it is important that you know what a standard drink is when you are cutting down or trying to stick to a limit. In the box below are standard drinks of different beverages. What they have in common is that each drink contains about 10 grams of pure alcohol. The following can be used as a guide to help you keep track of your drinking. **Remember, each is a standard drink.**



Many individuals who would otherwise regard themselves as moderate drinkers can sometimes drink in ways that cause problems. For example, even consuming one or two drinks a day may present risks in certain circumstances:

- When driving or operating machinery.
- When pregnant or breast feeding.
- When taking certain medications.
- If you have certain medical conditions.
- If you cannot control your drinking.
- If you have a personal history of drinking problems.
- If you have depression or anxiety.
- If you have been told not to drink for legal reasons.

### What is High-Risk Drinking?

Some people may think that you have to drink heavily all of the time or be dependent on alcohol to have alcohol-related problems. This is not true. Some problems can come from simply being intoxicated/buzzed every now and again. Other problems come from regularly drinking too much even though you may hardly ever get drunk. In other words, alcohol problems can occur even when one drinks moderately.

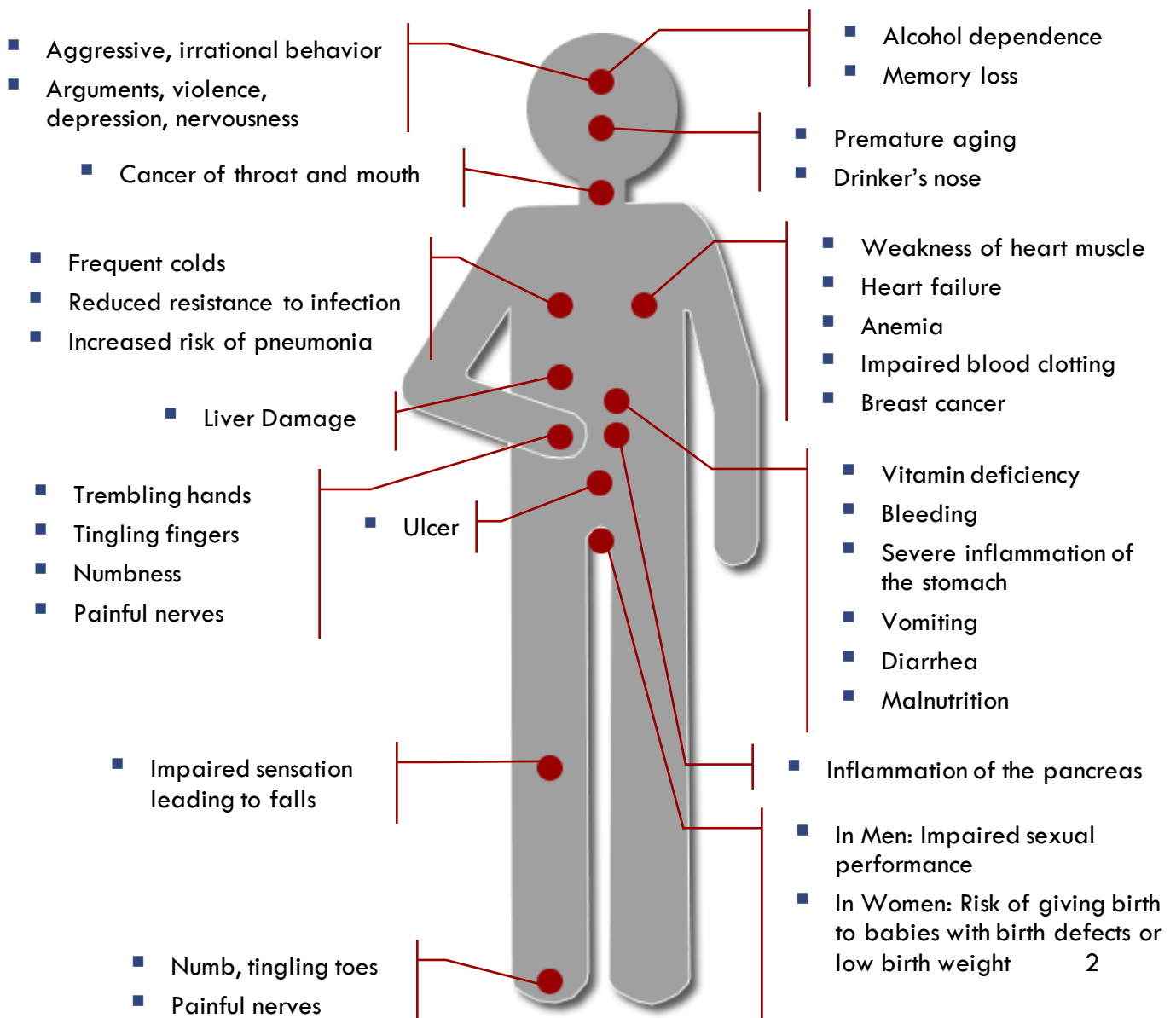
**Risks due to intoxication (feeling buzzed).** Examples of intoxication-related problems include: drunken driving, falls, hangovers, unsafe sex, arguments, absenteeism, and embarrassment. The problems can range from minor to fatal.

**Risks due to regular use.** Regular use of alcohol can lead to problems such as increased spending on alcohol, concentration and memory difficulties, stomach and liver disorders, diabetes, poor sleeping habits, gaining weight, and relationship conflicts.

**Risks due to dependence.** Some regular users of alcohol begin to spend more and more time drinking and feel uncomfortable if they don't drink. They may result in alcohol taking a larger role in their lives. When one becomes alcohol dependent, cutting down on drinking becomes even harder. Dependence can lead to anxiety, depression, withdrawal symptoms, losing interest in other activities and feelings of loss of control.

### Physical Effects of High Risk Drinking

In addition to the above mentioned risks, individuals who drink more than two standard drinks are likely to experience a number of physiological effects from alcohol, some of which may lead to physical difficulties. The following diagram outlines the effects of high risk drinking.



## Indications of High-Risk Drinking

High-risk drinkers may have difficulty recognizing the problematic nature of their drinking. They may minimize to others the amount of alcohol they drink or simply ignore the fact that the amount of alcohol they drink is excessive. Some indications of high-risk drinking include:

- Drinking alone when you feel angry or sad
- Being late or absent from work due to the effects of alcohol
- Friends or family have indicated they are concerned about your drinking
- Drinking even after telling yourself you won't
- Forgetting what you did while you were drinking
- Periods of headaches or a hang-over after drinking
- Past failed attempts to decrease your alcohol use

## How to Manage Your Drinking

Reading about the risks associated with high-risk drinking has hopefully changed how you think about drinking habits. After reading this material you may want to change your drinking habits in some way but are not exactly sure how. Many people change their behavior all on their own. Often, when they are asked what brought about the change, they say they just “thought about it,” meaning they evaluated the consequences of their current behavior and of changing before making a final decision. You can do the same thing by asking two simple questions: “What do I stand to lose and gain by continuing my current drinking pattern?” and “What do I stand to lose and gain by changing my drinking pattern?” To change, the scale needs to tip so the costs of drinking outweigh the benefits. This is called Decisional Balancing.

Weighing the pros and cons of changing happens all the time. For example, people weigh pros and cons when contemplating changing jobs or deciding to get married. Because you are reading this, you are likely considering both the benefits and the costs of your alcohol use.

Below is an example of a Decisional Balance Worksheet.

<b>Decisional Balance Worksheet</b>		
	Changing	Not Changing
Benefits of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>Increased control over my life</i></li> <li>■ <i>Support from family and friends</i></li> <li>■ <i>Decreased job problems</i></li> <li>■ <i>Improved health &amp; finances</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>More relaxed</i></li> <li>■ <i>More fun at parties</i></li> <li>■ <i>Don't have to think about my problems</i></li> </ul>
Costs of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>Increased stress/anxiety</i></li> <li>■ <i>Feel more depressed</i></li> <li>■ <i>Increased boredom</i></li> <li>■ <i>Sleeping problems</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>Disapproval from friends/family</i></li> <li>■ <i>Money problems</i></li> <li>■ <i>Damage close relationships</i></li> <li>■ <i>Increased health risks</i></li> </ul>

Now that you have seen an example of a Decisional Balance for someone else thinking about changing their drinking behaviors, consider what the personal costs and benefits of changing (and not changing) your drinking behaviors are to you. Write down the costs and benefits in the worksheet below:

Decisional Balance Worksheet		
	Changing	Not Changing
Benefits of		
Costs of		

**Decision to Change Worksheet:** Look over what you have written. What do you feel is the best choice for you? If you have made the decision to change your drinking behavior it is often helpful to refer back to this worksheet to remind yourself why you made the decision to change. It is also a good idea to talk it over with the person you are closest to so that they can fully understand why you have chosen your goal. Then they will find it easier to be supportive of your attempts to change. All change can be uncomfortable at first so it helps to get support from others.

### Identifying Triggers

Although we sometimes do things that are not good for us there are always reasons why we do them. An important step in trying to change a behavior is identifying why it occurs. Frequently, behaviors are triggered by something else. Many circumstances can act as triggers, such as pleasant or unpleasant emotions, a particular setting, or just a routine situation. To help you identify possible triggers for your drinking consider the following questions:

- With whom do you typically drink?
- What do you hope will happen when you drink?
- Are you in any particular emotional state when you drink (e.g., angry, depressed, happy, sad)?
- What physical state are you in when you drink (e.g., relaxed, tense, tired, aroused)?
- What setting do you tend to drink in (e.g. work, party, ex-spouse’s house)?
- What activities are you involved with when drinking (e.g., work, playing sports, watching TV)?

## My Triggers for Drinking

Take a few moments to note your common triggers for drinking. Finish each of the sentences:

1. The places where I most frequently drink alcohol are: \_\_\_\_\_
2. The people I am usually with when I drink include: \_\_\_\_\_
3. I usually drink when I am feeling: \_\_\_\_\_
4. I frequently drink when doing the following activities: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Situations where I typically do not drink are: \_\_\_\_\_

## Change Plan

Now that you have identified some of your personal drinking triggers the next step is to figure out how to be in these situations without needing a drink in your hand. For example, can you avoid the situation altogether or find a way of handling it without a drink? Or perhaps you can reduce the amount you drink in these situations?

Rather than waiting until you are under pressure, work out some strategies for managing your drinking before you get into these situations. You'll feel more in control if you have prepared for a difficult "triggering" situation. To help you accomplish this go through the steps outlined below.

**First**, pick one of your "triggers".

*Example:* Going to the club with friends

**Second**, think of as many ways you can for handling that situation and write them all down. Be creative and try to put down some ideas you have never tried before.

*Example:*

1. Ask friends to keep me from drinking
2. Don't go to the club
3. Go someplace that doesn't serve alcohol
4. Don't bring any extra money

**Third**, review your list and consider how these strategies might not work. Then figure out ways to work around these obstacles or determine if you need to alter the option in some way.

*Example:* If I don't bring any money, I will just ask a friend to spot me. Maybe I should tell my friends ahead of time to NOT give me money if I ask.

**Fourth**, read your list carefully and pick the **two** ideas that seem the most practical and sensible for that situation.

*Example:* Don't bring extra money and ask friends not to loan me any money.

**Fifth**, try out the most promising strategies and see if they work. If they don't, go back to step 2 and think of other ideas. It is important to recognize that some of these ideas may not work, (e.g., it may be tempting fate to say you will go to the bar and only drink orange juice). Thus, it is important to establish realistic and achievable strategies. Use the next page to work out these steps. If you need help, your BHC can assist you.

## My Personal Change Plan

### Step 1

Choose a trigger: \_\_\_\_\_

### Step 2

Write down as many strategies for controlling your drinking in this setting:

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### Step 3

Think of how the strategies in Step 2 might fail; then consider ways to work around these obstacles:

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### Step 4

Look at what you have in Step 3 and choose the two that seem the most doable:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

### Step 5

Test your strategies from Step 4 to see if they work. If not, start over at Step 2 to figure out new ways to make them work given what you have learned. Ask your BHC for help, if needed.

Make as many copies of this worksheet as necessary until you find a successful strategy. Most people will fill one out for each of their triggering situations. The more worksheets you complete, the more thinking and planning you end up doing which makes you more prepared to make a behavior change.