

# drinking

Think the worst you'll suffer from too much alcohol is a hangover? Think again, says Omega Douglas. We asked three women to keep a diary of their drinking and then sent them to discuss the findings with two specialists...

**We've all read the news** stories about a worrying increase in alcohol consumption among women of our age, but, as we open that bottle of pinot noir to accompany dinner or order our second gin and tonic of the night, none of us really believes the headlines apply to us. We may enjoy a glass of something most evenings to unwind at the end of a stressful day or a few bottles with friends at the weekend, but we're fit and healthy and don't have a drink problem, so we have nothing to worry about, right?

Wrong. "We all need to take note, because the facts are undeniable," says Professor Roger Williams CBE, clinical director of The London Clinic Liver Centre. "Alcohol abuse in the UK is on the up and the death rate from liver disease is increasing all the time. Women are far more susceptible than men, and, in my ward alone, women in their thirties and forties – many of whom didn't think they drank too much – are dying of liver failure."

The trouble with drinking is that people don't necessarily have any indication that it's doing them any long-term harm until they reach the stage where they've damaged their liver – when it can be too late. If you keep to safe limits – 21 units a week for men and 14 for women – experts agree that you have little chance of coming to any harm. But, if you go beyond that, your chance of developing liver disease increases. And, what with wine glasses becoming bigger and alcohol content more potent, it's not easy monitoring the exact number of units you're consuming.

We asked three women to keep a drink diary for a month and then sent each for a full medical at top Harley Street practice The London Clinic Liver Centre to see what effect their drinking was having on their health. They had a range of examinations, including liver-function tests, vitamin analysis (B12, folic acid and magnesium, which can all be low if you drink heavily), and tests for levels of carbohydrate-deficient transferrin (CDT), which becomes elevated if you drink regularly. They were then seen by GP Dr Ettliger and liver specialist, Dr Murray Lyon. Here are the results.

Rachel Dyer

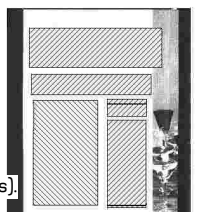
Marketing account director, 36

**Average weekly units: 30**

"My drink diary didn't surprise me. I had a fairly heavy month because I was staying with a friend, so we'd crack open a bottle most evenings. There have also been lots of parties and events. In fact, I probably drank more that month than I have in the past six.

I do enjoy a cocktail or glass of wine, though. My social life revolves around going out for dinner and to bars and, given the choice between a Cosmopolitan and a soft drink, I'd always opt for the former. I do most of my drinking at the weekend. If I'm getting ready to go out, I'll open a bottle and, even if I'm having a quiet night in with friends, I'll have a couple of glasses.

I don't suffer from particularly bad hangovers. If I started drinking in the afternoon and went on into the evening I'd probably feel lousy, but I can always function the next day. I've never really thought about whether my drinking may be affecting my health. The way I drink suits my lifestyle at the moment, but I know it won't continue so I don't worry about the long-term effects. I'm living →



the single life, so alcohol goes with the territory. I'm sure that when I settle down and have children my drinking will decrease. Taking part in this study has made me more aware of the need for alcohol-free days, however, and also of the importance of being aware of the number of units I drink.

## The verdict

DR ETTLINGER: Rachel's tests didn't show any liver abnormalities, but her CDT result was slightly high, which shows she has been drinking excessively for the past few weeks. Her other results were normal, but she is drinking more than the recommended limit and, long term, were she to carry on drinking like this, she would become depressed and her liver function would become abnormal. She should reduce her intake and have days without drinking to allow her body to recover."

DR MURRAY-LYON: "The fact that Rachel can drink up to 14 units in one sitting runs all the risks of binge complications (see Kate's verdict, opposite). Although her liver function is normal, the fact her CDT is raised is a warning light for her to cut down. However, the fact that she drinks socially rather than alone and is aware of the risks are all signs that she is in control of her drinking. She knows that, if she were to continue to drink in this manner, she would run into health problems.

There are quite a lot of women in their thirties and forties with cirrhosis who were drinking just four units a day. You don't have to have been drinking for a long period – we are seeing people in their twenties with cirrhosis. I'd advise anyone who regularly drinks above the recommended weekly amount to have their liver checked because you can suffer

from serious liver disease with absolutely no symptoms."

## Jennifer Porter Full-time mum, 30

Average weekly units: 16

"When I read the headlines about the damage alcohol can do, I think, 'God, if I'm having more than the recommended number of units, I must be in trouble.' But even though I may be over the limit some weeks, I eat well and don't smoke, so I tell myself that counters any negative effects alcohol may be having.

My husband and I have a couple of glasses of wine most evenings once our daughter is in bed. It's a great way to unwind. We have big glasses and I don't pay attention to how full they are or to the alcohol content. We bought some pub-sized glasses and drink less when we use those – you feel you've had a decent amount even though you've had half as much. If we polish off a whole bottle, I'm just about guaranteed to have a headache the next morning. But I rarely get drunk these days. My drinking is far more moderate than it was in my early twenties, when we drank to get drunk most weekends. Saying that, I think you tend to lie to yourself a little as you get older. You tell yourself that because you smell the wine first and don't drink it until it's the perfect temperature, your drinking is somehow more sophisticated. But it's all alcohol at the end of the day.

I was shocked by the lack of drink-free days I had in my diary. I knew I drank fairly consistently, but seeing it in black and white has made me think I could cut back. I don't think worries about alcohol-related problems such as cirrhosis are relevant to me, though; I associate those issues with people who have drunk heavily for a long time."

## The verdict

DR ETTLINGER: "All Jennifer's test results were normal and, although she sometimes drinks slightly more than is recommended, I don't think she has anything to worry about. Having examined her, if I didn't know what her drinking habits were, I would have no suspicion that she drinks."

DR MURRAY-LYON: "Jennifer says she drank a lot in her early twenties, but her test results show

that this hasn't done her liver any long-term harm. The important thing is that she stopped before she did herself serious damage, because you can develop liver disease quite quickly, no matter how young you are.

Although Jennifer rarely exceeds the recommended guidelines for alcohol consumption, she should stick to the recommended two alcohol-free-days rule. She is fairly typical in that she drinks with meals, which means the alcohol isn't absorbed into her system as quickly, it takes longer to get drunk and any hangover won't be as bad. But drinking with food doesn't lessen the effect alcohol has on the liver. Nor does the fact that she eats a healthy diet and doesn't smoke – smoking and a bad diet are just additional health risks. In fact, fatty food will produce changes in the liver similar to those of alcohol, but alcohol has a more powerful effect, and effects damage more quickly.

There's no doubt that larger glasses are adding to the UK's current problem. Some glasses contain as many as three units, and alcohol has become more concentrated, too. Most wines used to be around 11 per cent; now many are 13 per cent. This is significant because it means you're drinking a lot more alcohol in one serving. Jennifer should keep an eye on this as she may be drinking more than she thinks."

## Kate Hide Legal assistant, 40

Average weekly units: 16

"Keeping a diary has made me realise I drink more than I thought I did. Because of the situations I drink in – during dinner with friends, at parties or work dos – it's not easy keeping an eye on the number of units I've had as glass sizes vary and you often get topped up

before you've finished a drink. Having said that, I know when to stop and I rarely get drunk.

The older I get, the longer I need to recover from a night of drinking. My skin looks blotchy and dry the morning after and I get headachy and irritable. One of my friends recently lost a whole weekend because she drank too much on a Friday and needed 48 hours to get over it. That doesn't appeal to me any more. Besides, I have two children, so I can't risk a hangover because I can't cope with them if I have one.

I do like good wine. I lived in France for a while when I was younger and the people I stayed with were really into their food and wine and taught me how to appreciate it. My drinking has become more refined as I've aged, simply because I drink better-quality alcohol and I'm prepared to spend a bit more. I'd miss it too much if I stopped drinking altogether but, after taking part in this feature, I will monitor the number of units I have more carefully."

## The verdict

DR ETTLINGER: "Kate's tests revealed that her magnesium level is slightly low, which indicates that she drinks fairly regularly, but there are no health implications of her drinking beyond that. Her liver function was perfectly normal, as were the results of all her other tests. She mentioned that she is feeling a bit low at the moment, so I'd advise her to avoid alcohol as it is a depressant."

some weeks, which is good as it will allow her liver and the rest of her body a chance to recover. It's a good idea to have at least two alcohol-free days a week.

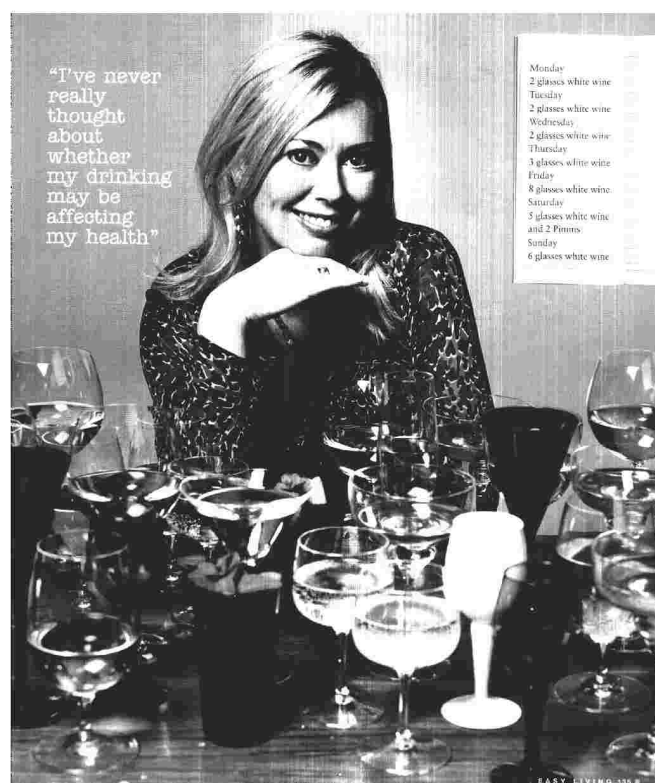
It's no surprise that Kate's hangovers have got worse as she's grown older. Metabolism slows down with age, which means it takes your

system longer to expel toxins. And alcohol is a toxin – it affects every organ.

Your stomach gets red hot if you've been drinking heavily, which is why you often feel nauseated, and lots of people suffer diarrhoea because it affects the gut. Binge drinking – more than six units in one sitting – can trigger an irregular heartbeat (what we doctors call 'holiday heart' or 'weekend heart') and inflame your pancreas – a potentially lethal complication. Prolonged heavy drinking also shrinks the brain and is one of the causes of dementia. And then, of course, there's cirrhosis, which stops the liver functioning properly and can be fatal.

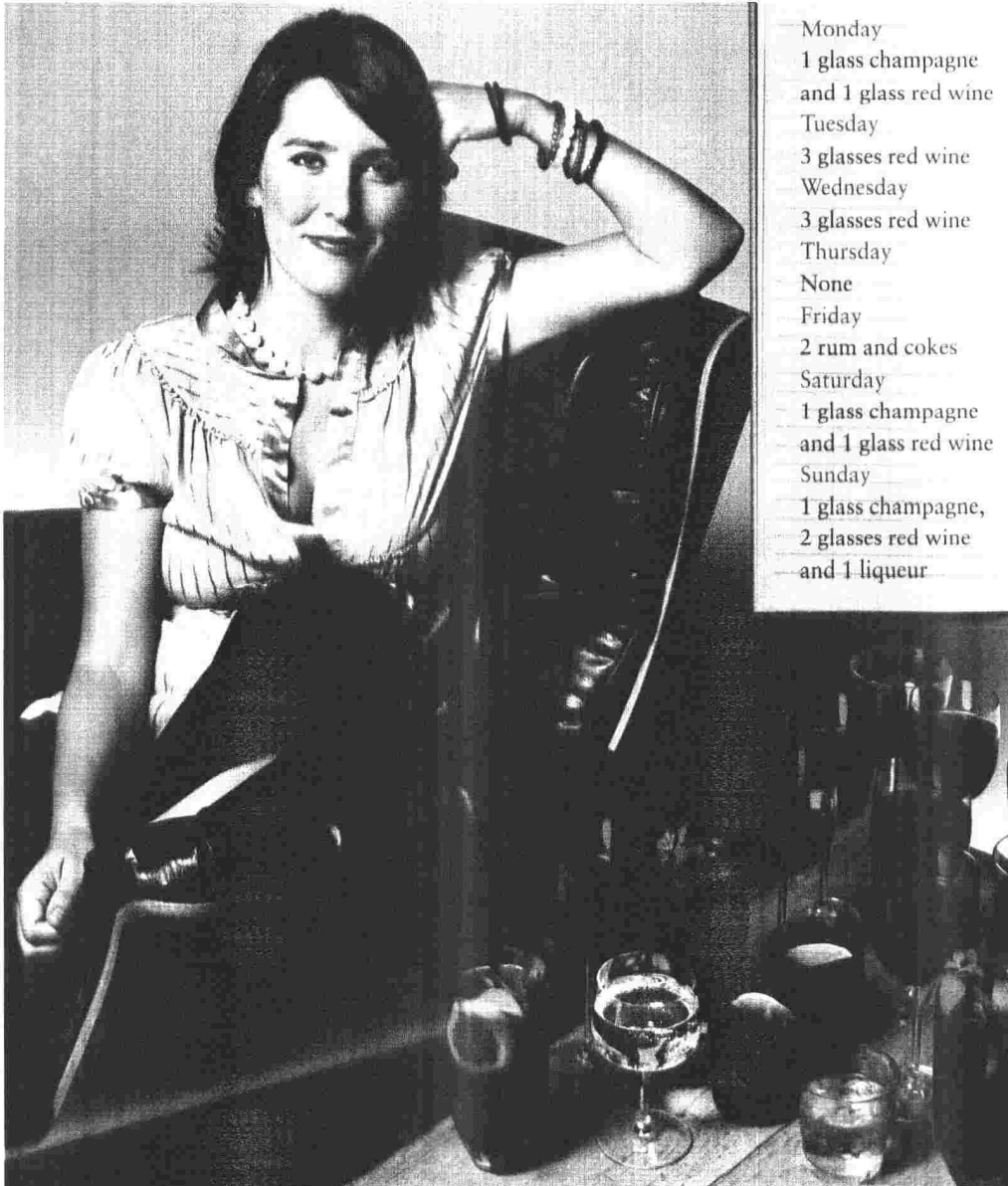
The fact that Kate enjoys good wine and rarely mixes her drinks means that any hangover she does suffer won't be as bad as it could be.

All alcoholic drinks have a different chemical composition, so, while a cheap, acidic red wine, port or brandy is likely to give you a nasty hangover, a decent claret probably won't. However, make no mistake – just because you drink good-quality alcohol doesn't make you any less susceptible to alcohol-related damage." ■



Source: Easy Living  
Edition:  
Country: UK  
Date: Thursday 1, March 2007  
Page: 134,135,136,137  
Area: 1710 sq. cm  
Circulation: 171038 Monthly  
BRAD info: page rate £9,330.00, scc rate  
Phone: 0207 499 9080  
Keyword: The London Clinic

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Monday  
2 glasses white  
wine  
Tuesday  
1 glass red wine  
Wednesday  
1 beer  
Thursday  
4 glasses white  
wine  
Friday  
1 beer  
Saturday  
3 glasses white  
wine  
Sunday  
3 glasses red wine



DR MURRAY LYON: "Kate  
drinks hardly anything