

I'm a middle-class drinker and it's slowly killing me

Many Britons think a couple of glasses of wine a night can't harm them. But a new high-tech liver test could give them a nasty surprise...



By **LAUREN BOOTH**

MY NAME is Lauren Booth and I'm a middle-class drinker. There, I've said it. According to research into the type of person most likely to be damaging themselves with alcohol, it's people like you and me who are drinking ourselves into an early grave.

Spa towns and villages with golf clubs have up to 26.4 per cent of inhabitants drinking at hazardous levels — between 22 and 50 units a week for men; 15 to 35 for women. Not only is it bad for the liver long term, but it's bad for your blood pressure, brain and fertility.

In recent months — particularly since my 40th birthday — I've noticed it's not just my husband and me, but all the couples we know, who feel the need to 'justify' the amount we drink.

There was a time when we could just about get away with a hangover on a Sunday morning, but a thumping head and nausea on the school run? That's a little harder to justify.

Naomi, a social worker, talks about 'cutting down' as she pours us giant glasses of red wine — you know, the ones that hold half a bottle.

Suzanne, a sculptor, who's been feeling woozy for months, drinks vodka shots 'because it's the weekend'. As for me, three bottles of wine in seven days is a quiet week.

Every time I open a bottle, I say: 'Next week, that's it — no alcohol for a month!' But I always put it off until the following week. The longest I've gone without a drink (excluding pregnancy) is six days. And that was in the Middle East.



To find out what effect years of social drinking have had on my body, I went to Harley Street for a pioneering new test. Dr Rajiv Jalan is a hepatologist — a specialist in diseases of the liver — at University College Hospital and the Royal Free in London.

First, I am given a straightforward blood test. This is the conventional method, available at any GP's surgery, for checking the liver is functioning well. The result? Completely normal. I feel like jumping up and down and shouting: 'In your face, government goody-goodies!'

Then it's time for the fibroscan, available only privately. A handheld device the size of an orange sends a mechanical pulse through the surface of the skin. In turn, it sends an elastic wave (a bit like a sound wave) through the liver. This is tracked to see how easily it travels through the organ — one reading takes just ten seconds.

A HEALTHY liver is floppy, but if it is injured, damaged or infected, it becomes scarred, making it stiffer. The stiffer your liver, the more difficult for the wave to travel through the organ — and therefore the more damaged it is likely to be.

'If there's fibrosis (scarring), your liver is telling you "I'm not right" and you need to do something about it,' says Dr Jalan.

A reading above five is deemed abnormal and may indicate signs of early liver damage. Anything over ten could indicate serious problems, such as cirrhosis or liver disease. With a reading of 8.8, my liver is 'abnormal'.

When Dr Jalan asks if I've been experiencing increased fatigue, irritability and problems sleeping — all things I've put down to the

stress of everyday life — alarm bells start ringing.

I panic. Why didn't the blood test pick up on anything? Dr Jalan explained that the blood test measures the amount of enzymes that have spilled out into the blood, and this only happens when liver damage is extensive.

'We've picked up on things before that, when your liver is merely stressed,' he says.

'A low score doesn't mean you don't drink; nor does a high score mean you drink excessively. What it does do is give us an idea of injury to the liver, which can be caused by anything from drinking to hepatitis.

'Up to five is normal and wouldn't require any further investigation. Between five and seven could indicate early scarring due to minor infection. Between seven and ten, the liver scarring is moderate. Over ten, it's severe.

'A high score for one person may not be as serious as a high score for someone else. The person's lifestyle, habits and what conditions they suffer from need to be taken into account.

'A score of 8.8 may seem slightly elevated, but don't panic, it's not irreversible. It simply means you need to do something to change your lifestyle — reduce your alcohol intake or, if possible, stop drinking altogether. Then have the test repeated in three months.' Hopefully with a lower result.

Initially, I thought the damage the scan revealed occurred in my teens when I used to binge drink. From the age of 15, I'd regularly down half a bottle of vodka on a night out. A lot for the time, but by today's standards, it is much the norm.

But I'd continued to drink, so the damage is as much down to my love of a glass of wine today as the vodka in my teens.

Worryingly, Dr Jalan implied there was a danger that if I carried on drinking at the same level, I could end up with liver disease.

What about the notion of detoxing as a route to better health — cutting out the rubbish, drinking gallons of water every January and taking the liver tonic milk thistle?

According to Dr Jalan, this is a waste of time. 'None of these things will prevent liver disease if you are drinking too much alcohol,' he says.

Although my liver is showing damage, the organ has an extraordinary capacity to regenerate itself, provided an early diagnosis is made and appropriate action taken. Even hard-core drinkers, as long as they don't have cirrhosis — where damage is permanent — can reverse liver damage by giving up booze entirely.

And I shouldn't feel guilty: some people's livers simply don't cope with alcohol as well as others even though they may drink much less.

However, for me, while cirrhosis or liver disease is not an immediate risk, liver fatigue — that is, when the liver isn't working as well as it should — certainly is.

The symptoms include tiredness, lack of concentration, poor performance, even insomnia.

RECURRENT infection is another risk. A poorly functioning liver can make people more susceptible to colds and flu.

'If you push it too far and continue to punish the liver by excessive drinking, it can be irreversible,' says Dr Jalan. The only option left then may be a liver transplant.

'There is nothing wrong with the occasional glass of wine — as long as it's just that,' says Dr Jalan.

'The important actions you can take to decrease your chances of damaging your liver are to lose weight if you have a high body mass index (BMI), exercise and stop drinking.'

So, after our 90-minute consultation, my prognosis is 'fantastic', he says. Losing weight — a stone and a half in my case — is as important to the liver as cutting out alcohol. If I do this, I am assured my results could be down to five or six within 12 weeks, and I will be able to say I've never felt better.

I leave the centre excited by my challenge and confident that I can make the changes needed.

After such a mental kick up the backside, I am now officially on the wagon. Unfortunately, a few weeks ago, I drank 20 units of alcohol. But that was because of the Rugby World Cup. Wasn't it?

■ *THE Fibroscan costs £205 plus consultation fees. Contact The London Clinic Liver Centre on 020 7616 7719 or visit www.thelondonclinic.co.uk*

Source: Daily Mail {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Tuesday 30, October 2007
Page: 49
Area: 657 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 2339278 Daily
BRAD info: page rate £32,508.00, scc rate £129.00
Phone: 020 7938 6000
Keyword: The London Clinic

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Picture: GETTY IMAGES