



Alcohol-free foods and drinks

This leaflet has been produced by the Substance Misuse Specialists in Liver Transplant (SMSLT), a group of Clinical Nurse Specialists representing liver transplant units across the UK and follows the national guidelines.

You may be asked to sign an alcohol agreement committing you to a lifelong abstinence from alcohol if you are:

- Being assessed for a liver transplant
- Are on the liver transplant waiting list
- Have had a liver transplant for alcohol-related liver disease
- If alcohol may have contributed to your liver disease in any way

The majority of people are able to abstain from alcohol successfully, however a small group do return to some alcohol use and alcohol-free drinks can sometimes be a factor in this.

Why is this possible?

Alcohol-free drinks look, taste and smell very similar to alcohol so psychologically, people are still drinking; they have not moved away from alcohol or made the lifestyle changes necessary to maintain lifelong abstinence from alcohol (also known as ethanol). This is important to remember because some people may be psychologically dependent on alcohol even when they are not physically dependent. A donor liver can also be more susceptible to damage than your own liver, partly due to the immunosuppressant medication (drugs taken that stop your liver from rejecting) that patients need to take.

The liver is donated on the understanding that the person receiving it will do everything in their power to look after it. In the case of people who are transplanted as a result of alcohol-related liver disease, there is an absolute requirement for total, lifelong abstinence from alcohol to ensure that the transplant has the best chance of a successful outcome.

Why is it important to avoid alcohol-free drinks?

Even alcohol-free drinks can have negative effects for people who have had a liver transplant for alcohol-related or alcohol-contributory liver disease

Acquiring a taste for alcohol can cause alcohol cravings to resurface, risking a relapse to drinking alcohol again

Sometimes drinking alcohol-free drinks can trick your brain into thinking that you are really drinking alcohol

When this happens it can cause an urge or craving to drink alcohol again

The danger in these situations is that the change in your usual behaviour is so minimal that switching back to regular beer is often a small step

Some alcohol-free beers do actually contain small amounts of alcohol

When you are in a social situation or at the pub it is possible to get drinks mixed up and find you have mistakenly drunk some alcohol without meaning to

The screening methods used in liver transplantation are very sensitive and can detect even tiny amounts of alcohol that can be contained in some alcohol-free drinks. Drinking any alcohol on the liver transplant waiting list is an absolute contraindication and may result in you being removed from the waiting list

In the UK these types of drinks are split into the following categories:

- Alcohol-free: contains 0.05% alcohol or less
- De-alcoholised: contains 0.5% alcohol or less
- Low-alcohol: contains more than 0.5% but no more than 1.2%

Alcohol flavourings

For the same reasons it is also important to avoid alcohol flavoured products such as sweets, chewing gum, chocolates, cordials, syrups, etc. Substituting non-alcoholic drinks, like cola or fruit juices can assist in the craving for something to drink but it is also important to remember that these drinks can be high in sugar. Shandy does contain alcohol, even ones sold as soft drinks in supermarkets may contain small amounts. Some people have found that they started drinking a shandy that was mostly lemonade and a tiny bit of lager. Over the course of time the lager can become the bigger part of the drink and you can end up drinking far more than you originally intended. This may cause a return to your original liver disease. There are many more types of soft drinks available now than in the past, so take your time to experiment with these to find one that you enjoy and feel comfortable with.

Tips for alcohol-free drinks

- Be careful you do not drink too much coffee or tea as this could affect your sleep pattern
- Try decaffeinated coffee/tea, herbal or fruit teas
- Juices are good substitutes for alcohol or coffee – such as apple, pineapple and mango
- You might also like to try combinations such as half bitter lemon and half orange juice, half cranberry juice and half soda water
- If you prefer flavoured water, savoury or spicy flavours, then tomato juice is a good alternative, if you like with tabasco and pepper
- There are other vegetable juices you might like too so try a few and see what you like best
- Patients find the use of ice crushed or cubes helpful

You can still have a good time without alcohol. Do not allow yourself to be pressured by other people to have an alcoholic drink.

Alcoholic drinks are high in calories so when stopping alcohol, weight loss is likely to occur. If you are overweight this may be beneficial and choosing 'no added sugar' or slimline fizzy drinks would be a helpful replacement drink. However if you are underweight choosing an appropriate high-calorie replacement drink would be beneficial. Good options here are milkshakes as they contain some protein unlike sports drinks. If diabetes is of concern then again milkshake is a good option.

Alcohol in food

People often ask if they are able to eat foods cooked in alcohol as they believe that it is burnt off during the cooking process. If you are being assessed for liver transplantation, it is important that you completely avoid all alcohol, in foods as well as in alcoholic drinks. Although some alcohol will be burnt off during the cooking process, there is no guarantee that it will all evaporate, and therefore you are advised that you should avoid anything cooked in alcohol as well as foods that contain uncooked alcohol such as sherry trifles, chocolate liqueurs or Christmas cakes.

Cooking with alcohol may also leave you with some spare alcohol that you might be tempted to drink. Instead of cooking with alcohol, take the opportunity to experiment with other types of flavourings, such as herbs and spices. Some people have reported cooking with wine but then taking a sip of wine while cooking, which is another trap more easily avoided if you are not cooking with alcohol.

It is important that you check the labels of any foods that you buy, to ensure that they do not contain any alcohol. If you are eating in a restaurant or at someone's home, ask if any of the food contains alcohol.

Products from pharmacies

It is also important that you check carefully any products that you buy from a pharmacy over the counter, to ensure that they do not contain alcohol. Items such as cough mixtures sometimes contain large amounts of alcohol. Mouth washes can often be very high in alcohol and, even though you do not swallow it, it can be absorbed directly into your bloodstream via tiny blood vessels close to the surface in your mouth. All of the major ranges offer alcohol-free mouthwashes, so choose one of these instead. If you are unsure, ask the pharmacist's advice.

If any you have further questions or would like to speak to someone about the information in this leaflet, please talk to the substance misuse nurse at your transplant centre.

Contact numbers

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