



***Healthy Choices***  
***Personal Steps to a Healthier Lifestyle:***  
***A Self-Help Guide***

University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health  
Department of Family Medicine and  
UW Population Health Institute

***Thank you for requesting this booklet.***

This self-help guide can help you  
take a look at your current health habits,  
specifically your use of alcohol and birth control.

By taking the time to complete this guide,  
you may gain new insights into your health.

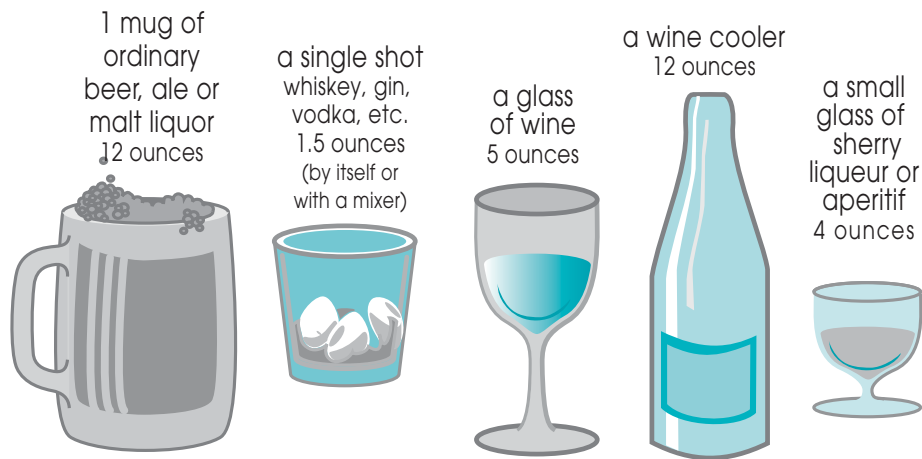
# Alcohol Consumption

Alcohol is associated with a variety of health problems. If you are interested in being as healthy as you can be, it is important to figure out how much and how often you are drinking alcohol.

First, think about the size of your drinks.

## What is a Standard Drink?

These drinks, in normal measures, contain roughly the same amount of pure alcohol. You can think of each one as a standard drink.



You can see that one type of drink is not “more alcoholic” than another. The term “standard drink” will be used throughout this guide.

- How many days per week do you usually drink? \_\_\_\_\_
- When you do drink, how many standard drinks do you drink? \_\_\_\_\_

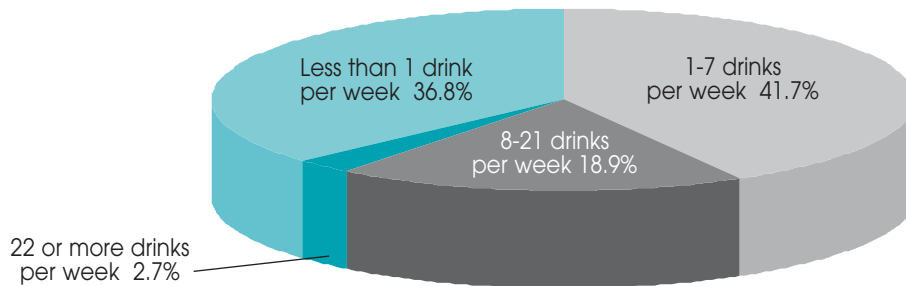
$$\frac{\text{Number of days you usually drink in a week}}{\text{Number of days you usually drink in a week}} \times \frac{\text{Number of drinks you usually drink}}{\text{Number of drinks you usually drink}} = \frac{\text{Average number of drinks a week}}{\text{Average number of drinks a week}}$$

- If you drink less than once per week, how many days per month do you drink? \_\_\_\_\_
- How many of those days do you drink more than 3 drinks? \_\_\_\_\_

## Alcohol Consumption

The chart below shows how you compare to other women in Wisconsin. You might want to put an "X" on the chart in the spot where you fit.

*Frequency of Alcohol Use in Wisconsin Women Ages 18-40*



\*\*In a sample of 7,204 women of childbearing age coming into a clinic to see their primary care physician.

These data were collected by researchers at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.

### *How do you compare?*

If you don't drink OR if you drink **3 or less drinks on any one occasion AND drink no more than 7 drinks every week**, GREAT! Your alcohol consumption puts you at low risk for alcohol-related health problems. However, if you've ever been diagnosed with alcohol dependence or alcoholism, have certain health problems or take certain medications, or if alcohol problems run in your family or if you are pregnant, it's best not to drink at all. Your doctor can give you more advice on this, if you like. Finally, you should never drink and drive. Please continue on page 13.

Please continue on the next page if you say "yes" to any of the following...

- You drink more than 3 drinks on any one occasion
- You drink more than 7 drinks per week
- You have physical or mental health problems that could be made worse by drinking alcohol
- You are taking medications that have a potentially negative interaction with alcohol

# Alcohol Consumption

It might be helpful to list what you like and what you don't like about your drinking. Really think about your responses. Listing exact details about what you **like** and what you **don't like** can be especially helpful.

Things you **like** about drinking:

*Example: "It helps me relax"*

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Things that are **positive** about quitting or cutting down on drinking:

*Example: "Save the money I usually spend on alcohol"*

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Things you **don't like** about drinking:

*Example: "Hangovers"*

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Things that **aren't positive** about quitting or cutting down on drinking:

*Example: "All of my friends drink"*

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## Alcohol Consumption

Just as important as how much you drink is how alcohol affects other areas of your life.

### **Health concerns:**

The following is a list of health concerns associated with alcohol use. Check off the ones that you have or think you have. Even if you don't check any boxes, the information may be useful to you, your family or your friends. There are, of course, other causes for each of these conditions, but alcohol use can be a contributing factor.

Stomach or digestion \_\_\_\_\_

Your stomach makes very strong acid to help digest your food. Your stomach lining is supposed to protect the rest of your stomach from the acid. Alcohol can damage the stomach lining so that the acid can burn the rest of your stomach. This can lead to dangerous internal bleeding. Alcohol also interferes with the absorption of nutrients in the small intestine and can increase toxins in the intestines that can eventually damage the liver and other organs.

Bode & Bode, 1997

Cancer Risk \_\_\_\_\_

Research suggests that women who drink—particularly at risky levels (more than 3 drinks on any one occasion or more than 7 drinks in a week)—increase their risk for breast cancer. There is evidence that drinking as few as one or two drinks per day can increase your risk. Alcohol can also increase your risk for oral, laryngeal, pharyngeal, and esophageal cancers.

Longnecker, 1988; Hamajima, 2002

Liver \_\_\_\_\_

Too much alcohol can cause damage to the liver. Your liver can fix mild damage, but if the damage is too severe, scarring can occur and your liver can't fix this. This scarring is called cirrhosis, which is a very serious medical problem.

Women develop alcoholic cirrhosis after ingestion of smaller daily amounts of alcohol than do men. Studies have found drinking more than 7 drinks in a week increases a woman's risk for liver disease. Women were found to be at higher risk of developing liver disease at any level of intake as compared to men.

NIAAA, 2005

Pancreatitis \_\_\_\_\_

Too much alcohol can damage your pancreas. When this happens, many people get pain in their upper belly, sometimes with nausea and vomiting. Damage to your pancreas can lead to diabetes. If the damage gets serious enough, the pain may never go away. Pancreatitis is potentially fatal.

Apte, Wilson, & Korsten, 1997

## Alcohol Consumption

### Weight/Nutrition

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Drinking alcohol can have very negative effects on a woman's nutrition and weight. Alcohol has more calories than your average starch, such as bread, noodles or rice. They are "empty" calories, meaning they provide no nutrition. Often when women drink they skip eating or eat poorly, limiting their supply of essential nutrients. If women do eat well when they drink, there are still nutritional consequences since drinking alcohol interferes with the nutritional process by affecting digestion, storage, utilization and excretion of nutrients. Essential vitamins and minerals are often deficient in women who drink. *"In more-than-moderate amounts, alcohol's contribution to poor nutrition is striking."*

Paul, 1998

It is possible to lose weight and/or gain weight by drinking alcohol. Depending upon your frequency and pattern of drinking, you risk becoming obese and obesity is a serious risk factor for numerous chronic illnesses as well as early death. On the other hand, you can risk losing weight as a result of poor nutrition, which ultimately could also lead to poor health as well as a lowered immune system.

NIAAA, 1993

### Diabetes

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If you have diabetes and take insulin shots or diabetes pills, you risk low blood sugar when you drink alcohol. Normally, when your blood sugar level starts to drop, your liver kicks into action. But when alcohol enters your system, this changes. Alcohol is treated like a poison by your body, and your liver wants to clear it from the blood quickly. The liver won't put out glucose again until it has taken care of the alcohol. If your blood glucose level is falling, you can quickly wind up with very low blood sugar.

[www.diabetes.org](http://www.diabetes.org), 2005

In addition, alcohol has many calories and interferes with weight loss. More than a couple of drinks a day can raise cholesterol and increase the risk of heart disease and stroke. Alcohol can damage the pancreas, which may already be damaged by diabetes.

### High blood pressure

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Blood pressure tends to go up while people drink alcohol and remains up for a few days afterward. The cardiovascular effects of chronic heavy drinking include an increased prevalence of high blood pressure, heart arrhythmia, and stroke.

Bernardy, King & Lovallo, 2003

If you are taking medications for high blood pressure, chronic alcohol consumption decreases the availability of propranolol (Inderal), used to treat high blood pressure potentially reducing its therapeutic effect.

Lieber, 1992

## Alcohol Consumption

### Heart problems like heart attacks, angina, heart failure, or palpitations

Women's hearts are not just smaller versions of men's, our cardiovascular systems respond differently and this is particularly true in response to stress and toxins like alcohol.

A little alcohol, maybe a drink a day, certainly no more than two, may be helpful to the heart. More alcohol than this can stress the heart. It can cause high blood pressure and high cholesterol, which can lead to angina and heart attacks. Too much alcohol can also cause a weakening of the heart muscle, which is called heart failure and irregular heartbeats that can be dangerous.

Cardiovascular effects in women are more severe than in men and emerge sooner with chronic drinking. They are also associated with lower rates of alcohol consumption than for men.

NIAAA, 2004

### Immune System \_\_\_\_\_

Alcohol use can dramatically compromise a woman's immune system. Because of this a woman can be more prone to a range of illnesses from the common cold to allergies to cancer. Studies have shown that alcohol exposure can suppress white blood cells, which are needed to fight disease. This might mean that drinking alcohol could make women more vulnerable to infections. Also, studies have shown that alcohol can increase antibody production thereby encouraging allergic responses. It is thought that drinking alcohol causes a woman's estrogen level to fluctuate up and down and that it is this fluctuation in estrogen levels that negatively affects a woman's immune cell function and her ability to fight illness and allergies.

Kovacs & Messingham, 2003

### Sleep, tiredness or low energy \_\_\_\_\_

Alcohol can help people fall asleep, but it doesn't let the brain get into the deep sleep that people need to feel refreshed in the morning. Alcohol can actually cause sleep disorders. Alcohol disrupts the sequence and duration of sleep states and by altering the time it takes to fall asleep and total sleep time.

NIAAA, 1998

### Brittle bones or osteoporosis \_\_\_\_\_

Osteoporosis is a skeletal disorder characterized by low bone mass, increased bone fragility and increased risk of fracture. One out of every two women over the age of 50 will have an osteoporosis related fracture in their lifetime. Research suggests that chronic, heavy drinking, especially during the teen and early adult years compromises bone quality. The effects of alcohol consumption on bones can't be reversed even if you quit drinking.

Sampson, 2003

## Alcohol Consumption

### Seizures/Convulsions

Alcohol can trigger seizures in some people. It is also dangerous to drink alcohol when taking seizure medication. The combination of seizure medications and alcohol can make people feel especially sedated. People who have seizure disorders are at an increased risk of seizure when they stop drinking.

Weathermon & Crabb, 1999

### Irregular periods (menopause)

If you are experiencing menstrual problems or irregularity, you should see your physician. Alcohol consumption can lead to irregular periods. Alcohol can actually cause several problems for the female reproductive system.

NIAAA, 2003

### Pregnancy

Once a woman becomes pregnant, drinking can cause damage to the developing fetus. Each year in the U.S. between 2,000 and 8,000 babies are born with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and thousands more with some degree of alcohol-related effects. These problems range from mild learning and behavior problems to growth deficiencies and severe mental and physical impairment. These injuries can begin before a woman even knows she's pregnant—and together they are called fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD).

FASD Center for Excellence, 2005

### Memory Problems

Research shows that drinking certain amounts of alcohol over long periods of time can permanently damage the brain's ability to form memories. Alcohol can also decrease your intellectual functioning, balance, and coordination.

Women who have too much to drink on any occasion might wake up and not remember parts of what happened to them, sometimes for days. This is called a blackout. The part of the brain that makes memories is especially sensitive to alcohol. Blackouts can be dangerous if people can't remember important things that happened to them while they were drinking, especially unwanted sexual activity. Most people can avoid blackouts if they stick to the recommended safer limits of drinking—that is no more than 3 drinks on one occasion for women.

Preliminary results from several studies indicate that women who drink may be putting themselves at greater risk for Alzheimer's disease.

Sohrabji, 2003

## Alcohol Consumption

### Injuries/Falls \_\_\_\_\_

Research shows people with a blood alcohol level of .03 or higher lack coordination, which can lead to injuries and falls. For example, if a 140-pound woman drinks 3 beers in 2 hours, she would have a BAC of .03. She is impaired at this level and puts herself at risk for possible injury.

NIAAA, 1989

### Alcohol withdrawal \_\_\_\_\_

Nausea, vomiting, shakiness, sweating, and agitation can come from alcohol withdrawal. Alcohol withdrawal can occur after a time of heavy drinking or when someone who drinks regularly suddenly cuts down or quits. Alcohol withdrawal can be very serious. It can lead to hallucinations, seizures (convulsions), and death. If you think you may be experiencing withdrawal, you should seek immediate medical attention. Do you know where you would go for this? Other possible ways to seek help would be to call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room.

NIAAA, 1989

### Depression, Anxiety or Irritability/Anger \_\_\_\_\_

**ANXIETY:** Some women drink alcohol because they are bothered by feelings of anxiety. Some women can get anxious and feel shaky from drinking, especially the day after they drink a lot. This can be a sign of alcohol withdrawal, which can be dangerous.

MacDonald, Baker, Stewart & Skinner, 2000

**IRRITABILITY OR ANGER:** Although alcohol can help calm people down, it can also cause some women to get irritable. Drinking can cause other life stressors that can lead to irritability.

Alcohol can lower inhibitions. Alcohol can affect the way a woman feels and expresses anger and may result in her saying or doing things that she may regret.

Cunradi, Caetano & Schafer, 2002

**DEPRESSION:** Alcohol is a brain depressant and can make you feel depressed. Drinking can sometimes cause stresses in people's lives, like problems at work, at home, with health and these problems can lead to depression.

NIMH, 2005

### Medication \_\_\_\_\_

Some medications have potential interactions with alcohol. You should talk to your doctor or pharmacist about how alcohol can interact with your medications.

Weathermon & Crabb, 1999

## Alcohol Consumption

Thinking about the past year, have any of the following things happened to you? Place a check next to the items that are true for you. For these "yes" items, put another check in the next box to the right if you think the item was related to your use of alcohol.

IN THE LAST YEAR HAVE YOU HAD.....	YES	CHECK HERE IF YOU THINK IT WAS RELATED TO YOUR USE OF ALCOHOL
A car accident or significant injury?		
A sexually transmitted disease?		
Sex when you really didn't want to have sex?		
Some strain in your relationship with your husband, significant other, or family members?		
Any difficulties at work, such as lateness, absenteeism, unreliability, or not doing your job well enough?		
Any difficulties in school such as being late to class, or absent, or not getting the grades you expected?		
Any difficulties giving the kind of care to your children that you'd like to give?		
Difficulty with any legal issues or trouble with the law?		
TOTALS	Total ✓'s for # of yes	Total ✓'s for # related to alcohol

How many ✓'s do you have? Even if you have just one, you may want to consider reviewing your drinking habits.

### **Financial:**

How much money do you spend per week on alcohol? \_\_\_\_\_

*If you answered \$5, you spend approximately \$260 a year on alcohol.*

*If you answered \$10, you spend approximately \$520 a year on alcohol.*

*If you answered \$20, you spend approximately \$1040 a year on alcohol.*

*If you answered \$30, you spend approximately \$1560 a year on alcohol.*

*If you answered \$40, you spend approximately \$2080 a year on alcohol.*

Make a list of other things you would like to spend this money on besides alcohol:

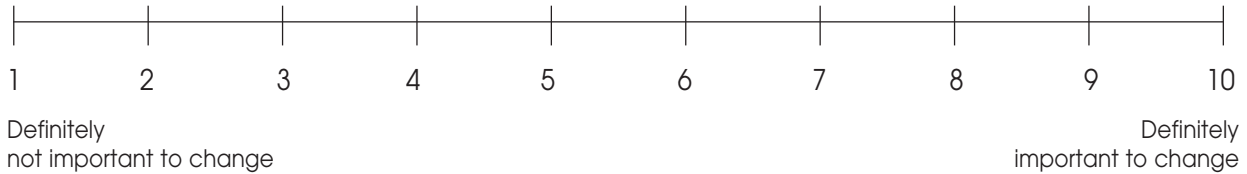
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# Alcohol Consumption

On a scale of 1 to 10, "1" meaning it is DEFINITELY NOT IMPORTANT to change your drinking and "10" meaning it is DEFINITELY IMPORTANT to change your drinking, circle the number that fits best for you.



Make a list of the reasons why you didn't say 2 points lower than you did? (For example, if you said "4" fits best for you, why didn't you say "2"?)

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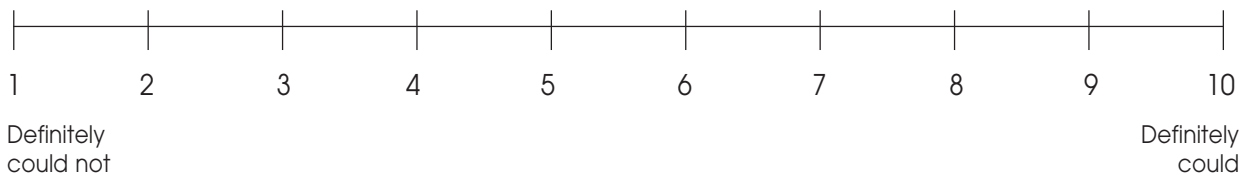
If you answered 0-5, think about what you are waiting for in order to consider making a change. Think about what would have to happen for you to want to make a change.

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On a scale of 1 to 10, "1" meaning you are definitely sure you COULD NOT change your drinking and "10" meaning you're sure you COULD change your drinking, circle the number that fits best for you.



If you answered anything less than about an 8 it seems like you are unsure if you could make this change. It might help to think about previous attempts to quit or cut down on your drinking. If you haven't ever quit or cut down on your drinking, think about other behaviors you have changed. Celebrate those successes. Think about the qualities you possess that made your behavioral change possible.

## Alcohol Consumption

Describe your attempts to quit or cut down on drinking, or your attempts to change other health related behaviors. Think about:

- How long the change lasted?
- What went well?
- What could have gone better?
- What would have to be different for you to sustain the change this time?

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List the qualities that you have that made that change possible:

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Think once again about your current drinking and choose the statement below that best represents your current thoughts.

- No, I don't want to change my drinking at this time. *If no, go to page 15.*
- Yes, I want to change my drinking: If after thinking about this, you DO want to quit or cut down on your use of alcohol, *you'll want to make a plan. Please continue.*

Do you want to quit or cut down?       Quit?       Cut Down?      (*select one*)

What level of drinking do you want to aim for:

Daily: \_\_\_\_\_ - Maximum in a day

*Remember the recommended limit for women is no more than 3 drinks on any one occasion*

Weekly: \_\_\_\_\_ - Maximum in a week

*Remember the recommended limit for women is no more than 7 drinks in any week*

# of days per week with NO drinking: \_\_\_\_\_

When are you going to start? Its best to pick a time less than one month away.

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# Alcohol Consumption

What are some things you need to avoid to reach and maintain your goal?

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Are there people that you can ask to help you in making this change?

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How will you reward yourself?

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Things to think about:

- How will you know that your plan is working?
- What can you do if your plan doesn't work as well as you'd like?

*Remember: You can revise your plan.  
If your plan doesn't work as well as you would have liked,  
it is a weakness in the plan not a weakness in you!*

*Plans can be changed!*

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# Birth Control

The next section asks you to consider your current use of birth control. Before you begin, please check all that apply.

- You never have and never will have intercourse with men
- You have had a hysterectomy
- You are past menopause

*If you checked even one of the boxes above, you are not at risk for an unintended pregnancy and can skip this section.*

What method of birth control are you using?

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Are you using your birth control 100% effectively?

- Yes     No     Don't know

For birth control to work, it has to be used 100% of the time and the directions need to be followed very carefully. Almost 50% of all pregnancies in the U.S. are unintended. Of those, about 50% occur while a woman is using birth control. Sometimes even the slightest oversight can result in pregnancy.

There are many options for preventing pregnancy—if that’s what you would like to do. Your body and your personal choices play a big part in determining a birth control method that will work for you and your partner. The best thing you can do for yourself if you want to prevent pregnancy at this time is to see a physician.

***In the meantime, a very effective method for preventing pregnancy and the risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease, such as AIDS/HIV, is the combination of spermicidal foam and condoms.***

What are the **good things** about becoming pregnant now?

*Example: "I have always wanted a baby"*

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What are the things about becoming pregnant now that **wouldn't be good**?

*Example: "Having a baby right now doesn't fit in with my school or work goals"*

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# Birth Control

What do you **like** about your birth control?

*Example: "It's really convenient"*

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Things that are **positive** about changing your method:

*Example: "I would have to think about it less"*

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What **don't you like** about your birth control?

*Example: "My partner complains about it"*

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Things that **aren't positive** about changing your method:

*Example: "I don't have a doctor right now"*

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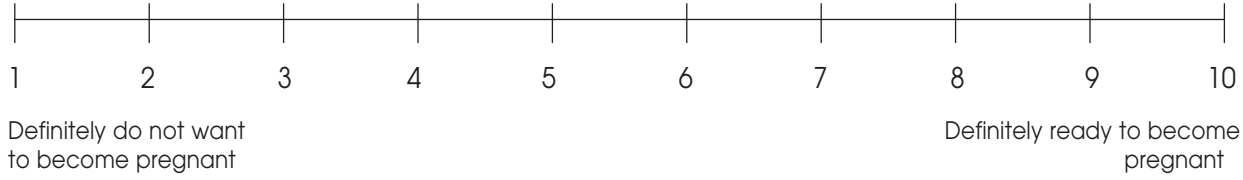
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# Birth Control

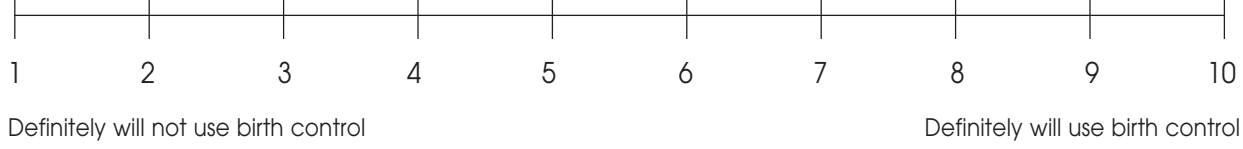
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On a scale of 1 to 10, "1" meaning you DEFINITELY DO NOT want to become pregnant and "10" meaning you're DEFINITELY READY to become pregnant. Circle the number that best fits you.



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On a scale of 1 to 10, "1" meaning you DEFINITELY WILL NOT use birth control correctly every time you have sex, and "10" meaning you DEFINITELY WILL use birth control correctly every time you have sex. Circle the number that best fits you.



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Think once again about your current method of birth control. Choose the statement that best represents your current thoughts.

- YES, I am willing to use my current method correctly or switch to a new method of birth control.
- No, I don't want to make any changes in my current method. I realize that I may become pregnant.

# Birth Control

If you are not ready to make a plan, what would have to happen for you to change your birth control practices?

Would you want any of the following to happen?

- An unintended pregnancy
- Having a child affected by drinking because you were drinking when you didn't know you were pregnant
- Having a child with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or other conditions related to prenatal alcohol exposure.

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If you are willing to change your current method or your effective use of that method, you might consider making a plan.

What would you be willing to do? (for example: make changes to my environment to make it easier to remember or use my birth control, ask for agreement from my partner, make an appointment to see a doctor)

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Who could you ask to support you?

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How will your partner(s) react to your decision?

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How can you reward yourself for taking this positive step?

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In the coming weeks, record the drinks you consume and your birth control usage.  
This will help you to support your goals—whatever they may be.

**If you have any additional questions about alcohol use and pregnancy,  
please contact:**

**Healthy Choices**  
**Phone (toll-free): 1-800-752-3157**  
**Email: [healthy.choices@fammed.wisc.edu](mailto:healthy.choices@fammed.wisc.edu)**

**Remember: If you are pregnant or could become pregnant,  
don't drink alcohol.**

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University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health  
Department of Family Medicine and  
UW Population Health Institute

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