

Stone cold sober

As you emerge from your hangover this morning, the thought of a month off the demon drink probably sounds just the tonic. Claire Rees took a self-imposed 31-day break, while everyone else was filling their glasses and partying through Christmas. So how did she get on?



ME
Moderate drinker and heck of a lightweight. Enjoys white wine and anything fizzy. Doesn't drink during the week, unless on special occasions – like party season. Which usually starts early November.
But after dreading the thought of weeks and weeks of boozy nights out, I decided to take up Alcohol Concern's 31 days without alcohol challenge.
The charity's research found alcohol consumption increases by 40% in December, and they're encouraging people to take a month-long break at the end of it, starting today.
■ Claire during Christmas party season, 2011, fizz in hand

WEEK ONE

I've been warned of people who give up for a month and never go back.
"My husband did that 10 years ago and is now the most boring person I know," says a friend.
I think I'll take the risk – and I wake up Monday feeling excited and raring to go.
I make it to the gym three times, even on a Friday night, while by now I'd have started warming up for Christmas with a glass of wine at home instead.
The one thing I'm most looking forward to, apart from the lack of hangovers and a general feeling of ruin by the weekend, is eating better.
I eat healthily all year around, unless I've been drinking even one glass the night before.
And then it's a can of coke, crisps and stomach-heavy chicken things covered in cheese.
Wary of being a bore, I make a conscious decision not to make a big deal of my temporary lifestyle change (except to the lucky nearest and dearests.)
I'm conscious of not coming across like a Gwyneth Paltrow-type Buzz Killington, so my approach is – only tell someone if they ask.
But at a birthday dinner, I feel guilty not toasting with the birthday boy (I think it's rude not to drink with someone on a special occasion and you'll get daggers if you do it on mine) and make quite a big deal of how sorry I am that I'm on the cranberry.
He has a perfectly lovely time with a few beers to himself. So far, so pipsy.

WEEK TWO

The Christmas invitations are coming in, and I'm contemplating those sober nights out, wondering how I'll manage.
At a launch party, I accidentally take a sip of a buck's fizz that I think is orange juice and I'm gutted.
I really don't want to break.
That weekend it's a trip away with a group of friends and they're all convinced I'm going to fail, even willing me to. Which makes me more determined. I'll

show them.
On the way to the pub on Friday, everyone's in buoyant mood and looking forward to their first pint and I feel a huge urge for a glass of white.
Ask the bar tender for an elderflower, but all they have is lemonade. I sip that in wine glasses (they don't have flutes, sigh), before we go back to the house where everyone's on the red and I'm curled up with herbal tea.
I have a brilliant night. Sober charades is fun, and we're up talking and laughing until 3am. I don't know whether I'm sucking up their potent vibes or being comfortable in a home rather than 'out' makes abstaining not an issue.
At dinner in a lovely restaurant the next evening, bottles of red and white are ordered and I'm jealous, but the amazing food makes up for it.
I can polish off more now I'm not drinking, and I feel less full.
On the way home that Sunday, we pop to two pubs, first for a roast and then to one of my favourite old locals with school friends for the traditional switching on of the lights in the village (usually an excuse to get merry together.)

I'm getting used to being teetotal. Getting in the Christmas spirit doesn't demand my liver has to be soaked in it.
ALCOHOL RESISTED: Two glasses of champagne, half a bottle of white wine, half a bottle of red wine, two pints of cider and black, half a bottle of red wine, two more glasses of white wine.

WEEK THREE

Reluctantly turn down a glass of wine at the hairdressers, then meet friends for dinner.
Again I can eat more and lap up three courses.
But I find sitting in the pub afterwards a little dull. When we're chatting over dinner, I have something to do, but sitting with a coke in a bar just seems pointless and a waste of sugar. I'd rather be at home.
I'm at a ball the next night and get annoyed on the way home from work when I remember I can't have a glass of wine in the bath as I get ready.
This week is probably my most difficult. I'm finding not drinking tedious, talking about not drinking is tedious, and I'm missing the unwinding power of even the smallest glass of wine.
At the ball I dance as much as anyone else, but I'm envious of how the rioja loosens everyone else's tongue as they talk to strangers on our table. Everyone's knocking it back, it's Friday night and I feel like the odd one out.
Saturday it's ice skating (no mulled wine for me), and a friend comes to stay, bringing champagne. I nearly crack it open,

on his "I haven't seen you for ages", moan, but resist and am glad the next morning.
ALCOHOL RESISTED: One white wine, half a bottle of white wine, a vodka and coke, another white wine, half a bottle of red wine, three mulled wines, a third of a bottle of champagne.

WEEK FOUR

I'm enjoying my alcohol holiday now.
I'm up at 9am on Saturday, tidying the flat and writing Christmas cards, I have vague memories of previous years scrawling them late with wine in hand or on the remnants of a hangover.
Planning for Christmas is easier. Shopping less of an ache with a clear head.
Some friends say I look "a lot better", which makes me wonder if I've been walking around like the Wicked Witch of the West, and my mum insists my eyes are clearer.
It's the beginning of December, and midway through the week part of me is really enjoying the break, while another part is getting bored of explaining why I'm on fruit juice.
It's also impossible to go on Facebook or Twitter without finding a newsfeed full of people looking forward to getting inebriated.
Attend another birthday meal, two parties (with free bar) which I leave early.
A photo of me appears on Twitter – the photographer caught me with my eyes closed so I look drunk off my eyeballs when I'm sober as I've ever been – a friend texts saying "knew you'd fall off the

wagon".
At a Sunday lunch with the girls to celebrate Christmas, I have a silly disagreement with a close friend and we make up quickly and laugh.
But we both hate confrontation and I find myself pining for a glass of something proper, to calm me down. Ginger ale doesn't take the edge off.
Discover Beck's Blue non-alcoholic beer and round off the weekend with a few bottles in front of the TV, realising they don't taste so bad.
Wake up feeling glad I kept at it, and almost start dreading the challenge coming to an end.
ALCOHOL RESISTED: A really potentially boozy one this: One glass of white wine, another two mulled wines, half a bottle of red, two more glasses of white and several shots, six cocktails, two more glasses of red, half a bottle of prosecco.

So did I make it?
Ok, an admission.
Day 14 – we're watching the rugby in a pub and I'm bored of Appeltizer (which the pub can't serve to me in placebo-assisting flute.)
Rugby days aren't rugby days without the odd cider and black (what can I say? I'm a hangover from my sixth form days) and I'm feeling sorry for myself.
I whisper to my boyfriend that I'm really struggling and he says he won't tell anyone if I have a sneaky one – I'm filled with excitement about cheating, savouring that first sip and feeling in sync with the rest of the pub.
I order half a cider and black (I know) planning to tell my friends it's blackcurrant and lemonade.
None of them notice, and those sips taste like heaven, even though it's nasty old C&B (why didn't I choose a nicer tippie for my one weak moment?)
Then it's back onto the Appeltizer for the rest of the night, and the rest of the month.
To make up for my indiscretion, I extend my dry month by a day, just to make myself feel better.

I don't drink tea or coffee, have never smoked, and so that relaxation comes from a glass, and I think I work hard enough to deserve it.
I also like making an occasion with drink, to me it represents making a fuss of someone or something, and I miss that ceremonial quality of opening a bottle of wine.
But I learn it's the taste, the experience of drinking, rather than the being tipsy that I miss.
Taking a month off at the start of party season gave me more energy to enjoy it when it was in full swing and going to parties again, properly, felt exciting rather than a chore.
I would never have had the willpower without having committed to this challenge, and I'm surprised that I (sort of) made it.
That first glass (of champagne, I'd earned it) tasted fantastic and while I'd been warned I'd fall asleep after two, I didn't notice any difference in my (already low) capacity for alcohol after a month off.
While I don't fancy the idea of going totally cold turkey again – I know I could limit myself to just one glass of wine every time I go out with ease.
Dry January, after staying sober through the most social time of the year, would be a doddle.
■ For more information on Alcohol Concern's Dry January campaign, go to www.dryjanuary.org.uk and at www.drinkwisewales.org.uk you can find their drink guide. Cancer Research Wales are running their own Dryathlon, visit www.cruk.org/dryathlon for details

This week we'll be mostly....

Seeing in new design talent...

...Two great Welsh milliners now have permanent homes for us to peruse their hats for our most special occasions. Catherine Povey, Carmarthenshire milliner, now has a studio at The Old Post Office in Llandeilo, and Cardiff's Robyn Coles has made her pop-up shop permanent in the capital's Castle Arcade. This one-off green piece with emerald silk and black rice pearls, called Lush, is £450 by Catherine Povey. www.catherinepovey.co.uk, www.robyncoles.co.uk

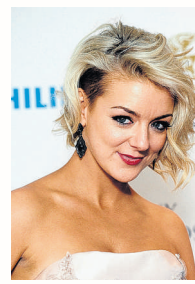


Getting over it...

...January is the peak time to ring relationship support charity Relate's phone line – as couples apparently avoid breaking up over Christmas.
Step forward Getoveryourex.co.uk – for anyone going through a break-up.
It's full of tips on dealing with being single again at this time of year. That and the stack of chocolates and you'll be laughing, right?

Planning our retirement...

...The Dame Maggie Smith way. The actress stars in Quartet as one of a group of former opera singers living out their retirements in a grand country pile, planning to host a concert in celebration of Verdi's birthday. It's directed by Dustin Hoffman and also stars Tom Courtenay, Pauline Collins and the lovely Sheridan Smith (pictured). The comedy's in cinemas today.



In this week's WM...



FRIDAY
Theatre Versus Oppression director, Dr Jennifer Hartley, on working with refugees in Africa; gangs in the US; and how she's using the stage to help torture victims tell their stories.



SATURDAY
Your guide to well-being in 2013.

WM contacts
Editor: Claire Rees
Write to us: WM, Media Wales, Six Park Street, Cardiff, CF10 1XR
Email us: claire.rees@mediawales.co.uk
Call us: 029 2024 3778