



'I GAVE UP DRINKING — AND SURVIVED'

Hands up ladies, when was the last time you had an alcohol-free week? According to our exclusive survey **59% of you** worry you're drinking too much and **33% of you** would like to cut down – but what really happens when you do? **Anna Hart, 28**, who's not had a drink for the last three months, tells all...

'GRAPEFRUIT JUICE? IS THERE SOMETHING YOU'RE NOT TELLING ME?' asked my friend, staring at my stomach. 'No! I'm not pregnant!' I screamed. 'I've just given up alcohol for a bit.' By the way, this was an old schoolfriend – my close friends would never assume I was with child if I ordered a juice. They'd assume I was hungover... Which explains why I started eyeing up the wagon in the first place. Now, I don't consider myself to have a problem with alcohol. I've never had to resort to a 'relaxing' work-day pinot grigio at lunchtime, but I do split a bottle of wine most evenings or need a few shots to get myself on the dancefloor. And, like a lot of women I know, I definitely overdo it. And I'm not alone, or the NHS wouldn't have just spent £10 million on an ad campaign reminding us that our recommended limit of two to three units a day amounts to just one double vodka. I used to think, 'So what?' then, three months ago, I began to wonder if I should give alcohol a

rest. **ONE FRIEND OF MINE DECIDED ENOUGH WAS ENOUGH WHEN SHE VOMITED IN A FOUNTAIN IN TRAFALGAR SQUARE** – and in the past few months I've had a series of smaller humiliations. One night I missed my nightbus stop and was woken up by the driver at the depot in Tottenham, who put me on the bus going the other way. 70 minutes later I was woken up by a new bus driver at the depot in Victoria – I'd missed my stop twice and somehow lost my laptop in the process. Another night, I failed to make it to a friend's 30th because I got stuck into the champagne at a book launch and passed out in bed at 9pm instead of changing to go out. Aside from those moments, there was the hungover unproductivity, the shiny-faced, morning-after pictures on Facebook, the falafel stain on my vintage Pucci. My relationships, my career, my health – I had a lot to gain, and nothing to lose but the booze. Then my fiancé, Sean, 33, announced he was

Anna Hart (left) wondered what life would be like when she decided to give up her party-girl cocktails (right) and after-work wines



giving up drink while he trained for the New York Marathon. This wasn't an easy decision for him – like me, he loved a pub. I was both proud and envious of his health kick, and his sobriety made me feel even worse if I drank, especially when it culminated in a drunken (me)/sober (him) row. After one big night out (the morning after I said, 'I don't know what got into me,' and Sean replied, 'Six cocktails'), I imagined a future with my sober boyfriend sitting perched on the moral high ground, and decided I was going to give up alcohol – for a little while, just to see how my life would be without it. My strategy for the first two weeks was to avoid pubs, parties, meals out – anywhere I'd be tempted to drink. I soon realised I'd thrown out fun



Above: Anna, centre, partying on without alcohol. Right: with her equally sober fiancé, Sean. Far right: three months on from her personal booze ban



« I WAS WORRIED HOW SOBRIETY WOULD AFFECT MY FRIENDSHIPS »

and human company along with the wine. I needed a role model, someone who makes not drinking look effortlessly fabulous. A booze-free doctor friend is the centre of every party. She's the sort of non-drinker I want to be: one who can pass as drunk. As I'm not a wine buff, I wasn't going to miss the damson notes of a Châteauneuf-du-Pape. What I was going to miss was being pissed. My first Friday night out – a colleague's leaving do – didn't go well. The moment I arrived I was asked what I was drinking, and was greeted by puzzled stares when I explained nothing. My departing colleague was visibly unimpressed. Alcohol's welded itself to our notion of a good time, and it's as if by being sober I was only half there. Determined to prove this wasn't the case, when they moved on to a club I did too. Ouch, was the music always this loud? I'd half expected to find drunken conversations crushingly dull, but instead found myself too busy worrying that I was the boring one, and wishing I had a double vodka to wake up my wit. Diet Coke doesn't get your toes tapping the way wine does, and I hovered around the edge of the dance floor like a teacher at a school disco. But the next morning I felt hangover-free and proud. And since then, sobriety's got much easier. OK, so the next time I went to the pub I felt like I had a sign on my head reading 'DULL', but as I calmed down, my friends' questions did too. And, three months on, I'm still drink-free. There are a lot of positives. It's amazing what you can fit into a Saturday if you get up at 9am (in the past I never made plans before 1pm, and even then might cancel

because I was a) hungover or b) slightly drunk again in a beer garden). I'm a regular at the gym (I used to go once a month), partly because I can't get my endorphins from cava anymore. And I've lost half a stone and my skin is brighter. Of all the things I stood to gain from giving up booze – like being a better girlfriend, writer, friend – I'm ashamed to admit that vanity is the handiest tool with which to beat myself from the bar. And as an immediate deterrent I recommend it. That missing half stone is all the more incredible given that I've rediscovered dessert. I used to shake my head at the 280 calories in lemon drizzle cake while slurping my way through the 280 in half a bottle of Rioja. It's also a relief to forgo any drunken tiffs with Sean. So are we now enjoying Brangelina's mutual respect and adoration? Er, no. In the place of drunken rows we now have sober rows. The difference being that sober rows are settled faster, don't descend into shouting in the street, and you actually know what they're about. I'm enjoying our new breed of spat, but I never guessed what I'd miss: tipsy flirting. I miss the three-pint compliments Sean used to give me. I miss

piling through the door after a boozy meal and tugging each other straight to bed. I was worried how sobriety would affect my friendships. Many of them were forged in the fire of tequila shots and cheap wine. Would I miss out on bonding experiences? Intense, wine-fuelled conversations? But our friends have been brilliant, arranging picnics in the park over pub dates and bringing posh apple juice with the cava. And I'm determined this won't be the end of our dancing days, so Sean and I are taking swing classes in hope of replacing 'misplaced confidence' with 'actual rhythm'. Last week Sean and I had a cocktail party to clear out our drinks cabinet, and by 3am were at a rockabilly club. A friend asked if it were true that I hadn't touched a drop all night, then said, 'You obviously don't need it.' I could have kissed her. I'm still fun! Is this the end for me and drink? Probably not. There's nothing wrong with drinking in itself, in fact, there's plenty right with it. Society is a clunky old machine and I'm all for a splash of social lubricant. I'd like the freedom to have a glass of wine if I fancy, or even get drunk if I want to. But not before I've regained the freedom *not* to drink. ■

OUR SURVEY SAID:

It feels like every week, we're being told that we're a nation of bingers who just don't want to stop. But how much are we drinking? And what are the real reasons why? We commissioned an exclusive survey to find out.

- 59% of you worry you are drinking too much and 33% of you would like to cut down.
- 43% have lied about how much you drink.
- The three top triggers for reaching for a glass of wine are when it's a special occasion, when all your friends are drinking or when you've had a

stressful day at work. You say that drinking makes you feel happier, funnier and more confident.

- 45% of you would feel more comfortable having sex with a new man after a drink.
- 47% of you think you don't drink too much, 39% of you have a couple of glasses of wine whenever you go out (six units) or a bottle of wine (seven to nine units). The recommended weekly intake for a woman is 14 units.

Photos: Daniel Ward. Hair and make-up: Zoe Taylor using Chanel Summer Collection