

Alcohol and risk-taking

Drinking alcohol can make you take risks you wouldn't normally take when sober. Staggering along in the middle of the road or causing damage to other people's property might seem like fun when you're drunk - but won't look so smart in the morning.

Taking risks can lead to much more than a bad hangover. Drinking too much means you run the risk of having problems with the police, getting into trouble with your parents, or seriously harming yourself and others.

Facts and Figures

So why does drinking alcohol make people take more risks? Scientists have found that it's because alcohol disrupts the brain's ability to make decisions and encourages risky behaviour.⁽¹⁾

This means you're at greater risk of having an accident when you're out drinking. Over 21,000 under 18s were admitted to hospital with an alcohol-related condition between 2006/07 and 2008/09.⁽²⁾

This is because drinking alcohol:

- Makes it difficult to co-ordinate your movements. So, even simple tasks like crossing the road are riskier.
- Stops you thinking clearly. So you're less able to judge situations when you have been drinking - which is why daring a mate to jump out of a moving car can suddenly seem like a great idea.
- Temporarily makes you feel good. So you're less likely to notice when something bad is happening around you.⁽³⁾
- Temporarily numbs pain. So if you or your friends do have an injury, it could be more serious than you think.⁽⁴⁾

Alcohol poisoning

Drinking more alcohol than your body can handle is very risky. If you're not used to the effects of alcohol it's hard to judge how much is 'too much'. In serious cases, alcohol will poison your system to the point where your brain may stop controlling your body's vital functions. After drinking too much you may have to have your stomach pumped, or face a night in hospital.

Between 2008 and 2009, over 945,000 people were admitted to hospital because of illness or injury caused by alcohol.⁽⁵⁾



Drinking and safe sex

Drinking too much alcohol can put you at risk of sexually transmitted infections, like chlamydia, syphilis, HIV, hepatitis B and gonorrhoea, as well as unwanted pregnancies. This is because you're more likely to take the risk of not using a condom, or forget to take your pill, when you're drunk.

Drinking too much alcohol can lead to having sex with someone you hardly know. People may worry about their drink being spiked with drugs, but experts believe that alcohol also has a large part to play in sexual assaults and 'date rape'.⁽⁶⁾

Sadly, because alcohol lowers your inhibitions and makes you more vulnerable, some people may get you drunk and take advantage of you. After drinking too much you might not be able to remember whether you consented to sex.



Alcohol and crime

Drinking too much alcohol could result in you and your friends becoming involved with the police. This could lead to a night in the police cells or even a court appearance. Figures from the police state that 10-17 year olds that drink alcohol once a week are more likely to become involved in a criminal offence.⁽⁷⁾ Being involved with the police at a young age could affect your job prospects in the future or make international travel difficult.

The British Medical Association states that alcohol is a factor in:

- 75% of stabbings;
- 70% of beatings; and
- 60-70% of murders.⁽⁸⁾

Drinking too much alcohol can make you feel angry, and more likely to start fights about things that might not seem important the next day. That's why in nearly half (45%) of all violent incidents, victims thought offenders were under the influence of alcohol.⁽⁹⁾ It might be your friends, or even a stranger, that starts the fight, but the consequences will probably involve you.

Even if you're not looking for trouble on a night out, alcohol lowers your inhibitions so you might get involved in an incident that you'd usually avoid. According to the police, Friday and Saturday nights are the peak times for street violence, most of which happens outside pubs or clubs.⁽¹⁰⁾

Staying safe

Know the rules: The UK Chief Medical Officers recommend an alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option.

Eat before: Eating a meal, like pasta or pizza before drinking can help slow down the absorption of alcohol and help you to stay in control.

Top up: Make sure that you have enough credit on your mobile phone in case you need to meet up with friends or call your parents.

Drink smarter: If you choose to drink alcohol, stick to the daily unit guidelines and make sure that you drink soft drinks in between the alcoholic drinks. This will help you avoid getting drunk, and keep you hydrated.

Don't mix: Try not to mix drinks as it makes it harder to keep track of how much you've had. Finish one drink before you start the next so that you can keep count.

Get home safely: Plan how you're getting home so that you can stay safe. Make sure that someone knows where you are in case you get into difficulties. Stay with your friends, keep enough money for a taxi and always make sure that it's a licensed cab before getting in as illegal cabs can be risky. If you're getting a lift, make sure that the driver hasn't been drinking - drunk drivers put themselves, their passengers and other people on the road in danger.

Keep an eye on your drink: At parties, unattended drinks can be spiked with alcohol or worse. Always keep an eye on your drink and don't accept drinks from strangers.

Look out for friends: Watch out for your friends on a night out and make sure that they're OK at all times. If anyone gets into difficulties, call an adult or if the situation is dangerous call 999.

Where to go for further information and advice

For up-to-date interactive information and advice about alcohol and sex visit R U Thinking? (www.ruthinking.co.uk).

Head to The Site (www.thesite.org) for regularly updated guides that take a comprehensive look at alcohol, drugs and much more.

Drinkaware (www.drinkaware.co.uk) has all the information and advice you need to make more informed choices about alcohol.

References

- 1 Lane, S 2004, 'Alcohol Effects on Human Risk Taking', *Psychopharmacology*, vol 172, no 1, pp 68-72.
- 2 North West Public Health Authority Local Alcohol Profiles, 2010. <http://www.nwph.net/alcohol/lape/downloads/Lape2010LADownloadNWPFO070311.xls#NI39-HES Adms !A1>
- 3 Volkow, N et al 1995, 'Monitoring the Brain's Response to Alcohol with Positron Emission Tomography', *Alcohol Health* vol 19, no 4, pp 296-299.
- 4 Volpicelli, J et al 1999, 'The Role of Uncontrollable Trauma in the Development of PTSD and Alcohol Addiction', *Alcohol Research and Health* vol 23, pp 256-262.
- 5 North West Public Health Authority Local Alcohol Profiles, 2010. <http://www.nwph.net/alcohol/lape/downloads/Lape2010LADownloadNWPFO070311.xls#NI39-HES Adms !A1>
- 6 Hall, J 2007, 'Alcohol is the Most Common Date Rape Drug', University of Ulster.
- 7 Matthews S 2004, 'Underage Drinking: Findings from the 2004 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey', Home Office.

- 8 2007, 'Alcohol and Crime: Breaking the Link. All-Party Group on Alcohol Misuse'.
- 9 Kershaw, C et al 2008, 'Crime in England and Wales 2007/2008', Home Office Statistical Bulletin.
- 10 Maguire, M et al 2003, 'Reducing Alcohol-related Violence and Disorder: An Evaluation of the TASC Project', Home Office Research 265, p 7.

Contents approved by Drinkaware Chief Medical Adviser, Prof. Paul Wallace BSc (Hons), MSc, MBBS, FRCGP, FFPHM

Drinkaware

Samuel House
6 St Albans St
London SW1Y 4SQ
Registered in England & Wales No. 4547974.
A company limited by guarantee.
Registered Charity No. 1094586