

Changing attitudes

Not all teenagers drink alcohol. In fact, growing numbers of young people are choosing not to drink it at all.

According to a recent survey of over 7,000 young people from 246 schools across England, the proportion of pupils who had never drunk alcohol rose from 39 per cent in 2003 to 55 per cent in 2010. Whereas in 2003, almost a half of young people (46 per cent) agreed that it was ok for someone of their age to drink alcohol once a week, by 2010, the proportion of young people who thought that weekly drinking was acceptable had fallen to less than a third (32 per cent).

In 2010, fewer than one in ten pupils (8 per cent) said they drank alcohol at least once a week, compared with one in five pupils (20 per cent) in 2001.

However, young people in the UK still drink higher levels of alcohol than in many other European countries and large numbers of 15-16 year-olds continue to associate drinking with having fun and are not aware of the serious problems it can cause.

What is alcohol?

Alcohol is a powerful drug that affects the way we think, feel and behave.

Because drinking alcohol can initially make people seem more cheerful, it is often assumed that alcohol is a stimulant. In reality, however, it is a depressant and slows down the brain and many of the body's functions.

Alcohol is absorbed into the body through the stomach and small intestine. It is then distributed throughout the body in the bloodstream, swiftly reaching the brain, heart, muscles and other tissues. It reaches the brain within five minutes of being swallowed.

The body cannot store alcohol and so gets rid of it through the liver.

Alcohol is so widely used that we don't tend to think of it as a drug and we can easily forget the harm that it can do.

According to the World Health Organisation:

Almost 4 per cent of all deaths worldwide are attributed to alcohol, greater than deaths caused by HIV/AIDS, violence or tuberculosis. Alcohol is also associated with many serious social issues, including violence, child neglect and abuse, and absenteeism in the workplace.

Chief Medical Officer's advice

In view of all the risks associated with alcohol, the Chief Medical Officer's advice to young people is that it is better for you not to drink alcohol at all – and certainly not under the age of 15.

If you are over the age of 15 and do decide to drink alcohol, he offers the following advice:

- only drink under the guidance of a parent or carer in a supervised environment

- don't drink any more than once a week

- be aware that drinking alcohol at any age can be hazardous to health and that not drinking is the healthiest option for young people

- keep your drinking within the recommended daily limit for adults – i.e. no more than 3-4 units per day for a man, and a maximum of 2-3 units per day for a woman.*

* A unit of alcohol is the amount that the body can safely get rid of in an hour – e.g. half a standard glass of wine, a third of a pint of strong beer, or a small bottle of lower strength alcopop. However, since alcoholic drinks vary in strength and some drinks contain more alcohol than others, it's best to err on the side of caution. For more information on units of alcohol, search for 'alcohol unit calculator' at www.nhs.uk

So...

Remember, you can have a perfectly fulfilled life without drinking at all. Many young people choose not to drink and put their time, money and energy into things that are more worthwhile.

But if you do drink, set yourself clear limits and stick to them. Keep alcohol under control and don't let alcohol control you.

It's a good idea to avoid drinking when your mum, dad, or other carer isn't around. There's a big difference between having a single glass of wine with your parents at a family celebration and drinking with your friends at a party where the alcohol is flowing freely.

Don't be conned by people who say that drinking any amount of alcohol is harmless fun. Any sense of excitement that alcohol brings will only ever be short-lived, but the pain and distress caused by excessive drinking can last a lifetime.

THE SOBER TRUTH



Around £800 million is spent every year on promoting alcohol in the UK.

In magazines, on billboards and on TV, you'll see shining glasses, sparkling drinks and smiling faces promising satisfaction, friendship, romance and an escape from the harsh realities of life.

But in all too many cases, real life doesn't work out like the adverts.



Here are twelve facts about alcohol that the advertisers will never tell you...

1 Physical health problems

Alcohol can affect almost every organ in the human body and is directly linked with more than 60 medical conditions, including heart disease, liver damage, stomach ulcers, and mouth, throat and other cancers. It is also a factor in 200 other types of disease and injury.

2 Mental health problems

Alcohol can cause and increase anxiety and depression. This is partly because it uses up our store of the natural brain chemicals that calm us and lift our mood. The more people drink the more likely they are to have problems with their mental health.

3 Brain development of young people

During the teenage years, the areas of the brain responsible for judgment, emotions, reasoning and behaviour are still developing. Drinking alcohol at this stage in your life can have a long-term impact on your memory, attention span and reactions.

4 Serious accidents

Alcohol is associated with up to 150,000 hospital admissions and between 15,000-22,000 deaths each year. Alcohol has been linked to 38-45 per cent of deaths in fires, 7-25 per cent of deaths at work and 23-38 per cent of drownings.



5 Physical appearance

Alcohol is high in calories and so can make you put on weight. Since it has the effect of dehydrating your body, it can also make your skin look pale and grey.

6 Lower inhibitions

Drinking alcohol has the effect of lowering your inhibitions and affecting your judgment so that you do and say things you later regret in the cool light of day.

Under the influence of alcohol, you are at greater risk of getting into an argument, picking a fight, having an accident and engaging in sexual activity that could result in a pregnancy and/or a sexually transmitted infection. A young woman who drinks alcohol is more than twice as likely to have an unwanted pregnancy as someone who doesn't drink.

7 Family breakdown

Marriages where either or both spouses have a drink problem are twice as likely to end in divorce as other marriages and excessive drinking is cited in around one in three divorce petitions. Alcohol is also a contributory factor in about 50 per cent of cases of domestic violence.

8 Education

Studies have shown that drinking alcohol may affect your ability to concentrate and to do well at school. If you drink alcohol frequently, you will be twice as likely to miss school and get poor exam results.

9 Crime

Young people who often drink alcohol are more likely to engage in antisocial behaviour and commit criminal offences than those who don't. A Home Office survey of over 3,000 young people aged 10-17 found that although only 14 per cent of them drank alcohol once a week or more, they committed 37 per cent of offences. On the other hand, the 45 per cent of young people who had never drunk alcohol committed only 16 per cent of offences.

A criminal record can damage your prospects for the rest of your life. In some cases it can prevent you from doing the job you want to do or from travelling abroad.



If you are under 18, it is against the law...

- to buy alcohol
- for an off-licence to sell you alcohol
- for an adult to buy or attempt to buy alcohol for you
- to drink alcohol in licensed premises (unless you are aged 16 or 17 and an accompanying adult has bought it for you to drink with a meal)

10 Alcohol dependence in later life

Drinking frequently during your teenage years can lead to alcohol dependence when you are older. This, in turn, brings with it increased risk of heart and liver disease, many cancers, digestive disorders and dementia. Around 1.6 million adults in England are moderately or severely dependent on alcohol.

11 Premature death

According to the World Health Organisation, drinking alcohol is the biggest cause of premature death and disability after smoking and high blood pressure.

One in four of all deaths of young people aged 15-24 is caused by alcohol. That amounts to two tragic and avoidable deaths every day of the year.

12 Cost to the taxpayer

According to government figures, the annual cost of alcohol to society is in the region of £17-22 billion. This consists of disorder and crime costs (between £8-13 billion), unemployment and workplace sickness costs (6.4 billion) and costs to the NHS (£2.7 billion).

