

Alcohol and risk-taking

Drinking alcohol can make you take risks you wouldn't when sober. Playing 'chicken' across a train track, or getting into fights with friends, may seem fun when you're drunk – but won't look so smart the next 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 in 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. Between 2007 and 2008, 811,000 people were admitted to hospital because of illness or injury caused by alcohol.⁽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. 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. 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. After drinking too much you may have to have your stomach pumped, or face a night in hospital.

Nearly 5,000 teenagers were admitted to hospital with an alcohol-related condition between 2007 and 2008.⁽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 risk not using a condom, or forget to take your pill, when you're drunk.

Drinking too much 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 makes you more vulnerable, some people may get you drunk to try and go further than you'd like. After drinking too much you might not be able to remember if you consented to sex, and may wake up next to someone you never wanted to go to bed with in the first place.

Alcohol and crime

Drinking too much alcohol can mean your big night out ends with you and your mates sleeping in a police cell – or ending up in court. Figures from the police say that 10-17-year-olds that drink alcohol once a week are more likely to be involved in a criminal offence.⁽⁷⁾

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

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

Drinking alcohol can make you feel angry, and more likely to start fights, about things that won't seem important the next day. That's why in nearly

half (45%) of all violent incidents, victims believed offenders to be 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 can mean trouble finds you. According to the police, Friday and Saturday nights are the peak times for street violence, most of which happens outside pubs or clubs.⁽¹⁰⁾ Being drunk, or just being around drunk people, makes you more likely to get into trouble.

Staying safe

Know the rules Government guidelines recommend men stick to no more than three to four units of alcohol (that's two pints of beer or four single vodkas) per day, while for women it's no more than two to three units (one 175ml glass of wine or three single vodkas). Alcohol can hit young people harder than adults so, if you do drink, aim for less than these amounts.

Drink smarter If you choose to drink alcohol, make sure you make plenty of room for soft drinks too. This will help you avoid getting drunk, and keep you hydrated.

Eating before Eating snacks between drinks will help slow down the absorption of alcohol to stop you feeling out of control.

Plan ahead Before heading out, plan how you're going to get home safely. Make sure you have enough credit on your mobile in case you get stranded. Avoid walking home if you've been drinking – you could get into an accident.

Be a safe passenger If you're getting a lift, make sure the driver hasn't been drinking. Drunk drivers regularly kill passengers, other people on the road and themselves. In big cities avoid illegal minicabs too – there's a risk of being attacked.

Keep an eye on your drink At parties unattended drinks can be spiked with alcohol, or worse, so keep yours close.

Look out for friends Watch out for your mates on a night out and make sure they're OK at all times. If anyone gets into difficulties, call 999 straight away.

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

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