

THE FACTS

Alcohol

Booze, Bevvvy, Shots, Hooch

What is alcohol?

Alcohol is a depressant, which means it slows down the body's reactions in a number of ways. The alcohol you drink in alcoholic drinks is a chemical called ethanol produced by a process called fermentation. Different types of alcoholic drinks are produced by fermenting different fruits (wine and cider) and cereals such as barley and rye (beer and spirits). The strength of the drink depends on how long it has been fermented for. Spirits (e.g. vodka) go through a secondary process called distillation which results in the alcohol being more concentrated.

There are different amounts of alcohol in different types and sizes of drinks. Alcohol is measured in 'units'. One unit equals 10ml or 8g of pure alcohol. For example, half a pint of ordinary strength beer (3.6% ABV), lager or cider contains 1 unit of alcohol. A medium glass of wine (175ml) contains about 2.3 units and a standard pub measure of spirits (25ml) contains 1 unit of alcohol whereas a large glass of wine can be 3 units or more. There are no 'safe' levels of drinking, but it is recommended that adult men and women should not consume more than 14 units of alcohol spread throughout the week. It is recommended, to be safest, that people under the age of eighteen should not drink alcohol. However, if they do drink it should be at significantly lower levels than adult recommendations.

When people pour an alcoholic drink at home they may well pour more than a standard pub measure, so it can be difficult to know exactly how many units they are drinking.

What are the effects?

Initially alcohol may cause people to feel less inhibited and more relaxed. As people continue to drink they can become uncoordinated and slur their speech. Some people can become aggressive or even violent. A lot of violence on the streets and in the home happens after people have been drinking.

There are a number of risks associated with alcohol use, both physical and psychological. These risks may increase significantly if you drink more and more regularly over time. Physically, you can suffer headaches, stomach problems, insomnia, raised blood pressure, weight issues and sexual problems.

Excessive drinking can lead to more serious physical health risks. For example, the liver can eventually become fatty, then scarred, and then stop working altogether (cirrhosis). The stomach, heart, circulation and brain may also be seriously harmed by alcohol.

Drinking and using other substances like cannabis and cocaine may exaggerate the effects of both the alcohol and the drug. It

is always advisable not to mix drugs and alcohol as some combinations may be highly dangerous.

Psychologically, excessive alcohol use may cause anxiety and depression and an inability to concentrate. In addition, there might be a risk of sexually transmitted infections/diseases, as social inhibitions are lowered and you may engage in unprotected sex. There can also be risks of alcohol poisoning if you drink too much alcohol on a single occasion, which can lead to coma or death. Sometimes people may be sick whilst unconscious, because of alcohol, and may choke on their own vomit.

Is it addictive?

People that drink high amounts of alcohol regularly over long periods may be at risk of developing an addiction and psychological and physical dependence may gradually develop.

It can also be possible to develop a tolerance to the effects of alcohol. This means that, like many other drugs used over a period of time, you need more to achieve the same effect. This may explain why some people seem to be able to drink so much before getting drunk and others get drunk more quickly.

Because alcohol can be a highly toxic and addictive drug, heavy drinkers who stop drinking may experience withdrawal symptoms. These may vary from irritability or sleeplessness to withdrawal fits. Due to the risks associated with alcohol withdrawal you should always get urgent medical help if you experience these types of symptoms.

What is the law?

It is illegal to drink or buy alcohol in a pub, off license, supermarket or online if you are under 18 years of age. Having alcohol bought on your behalf if you are under 18 is also illegal. The exception is when a person buys beer, wine or cider for someone aged 16 or 17 to be consumed with a table meal with an adult.

The police have the ability to stop people drinking in public places if they believe they are under 18 years of age. Persons under 18 who persistently possess and drink alcohol in public places are at risk of prosecution. You can legally buy alcohol if you are over 18 in licensed premises. However, most shops work under the Challenge 21 policy, where if you look under 21 (or 25 in some premises) and have no ID they can refuse your purchase of alcohol.

It is illegal to drive whilst over the drink drive limits. You could lose your licence, be fined or even go to prison if you are caught driving while under the influence.

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