Alcohol and Young people

Five key things you need to know

for the facts

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There’s good news. And there’s bad.

Despite what the headlines often lead us to believe, the number of teenagers who are drinking has declined in recent years. The age a young person has their first supervised, and unsupervised, alcoholic drink has increased as well.

On the other hand, among 35 European countries, the UK has the third-highest number of 15-16 year-olds who have been drunk 10 times or more in the past year.

So how does alcohol affect young people, and what can you do to stay in control?

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Drinking when you’re young has many short-term consequences

Being sick or having a hangover are the two most obvious immediate effects of drinking alcohol. But there are many more short-term consequences.

**Mood swings**
Alcohol is a depressant so it can make you feel more fed up and miserable, affecting friendships and family relationships.

**Weight gain**
Alcohol contains as many calories as pure fat – a pint of beer has about the same number of calories as a medium slice of pizza. Weight gain can affect your self-esteem and confidence.

**Appearance**
Alcohol dehydrates the body and can make skin look pale and grey, affecting your confidence.

**Disturbed sleep**
Drinking affects normal sleep patterns. It can make you have a restless night and feel tired.

**Alcohol poisoning**
Put simply, alcohol is a poison. If you drink too much in a short space of time and your blood alcohol levels get too high, your brain can stop controlling your body’s vital functions. In the worst-case scenario you could stop breathing, fall into a coma or choke on your own vomit.

By the time they’re 15, nine out of 10 young people have tried alcohol.³

Drinking when you’re young can also have long-term consequences

It is all about size
As you’re smaller and your body is still developing, you are likely to have a lower tolerance to alcohol and be much more vulnerable to its effects than an adult. How your body copes with alcohol depends on your height and weight, as well as what stage of your physical development you’re at.

Drinking while your body is developing can have a long-term impact on:

Memory, reactions and attention span
Areas of the brain responsible for behaviour, emotions, reasoning and judgement are still developing throughout childhood and into your teenage years.

Liver disease
Deaths from liver disease have risen in the 25 to 34 age group over the last decade. It’s because more people are starting to drink at an earlier age.

In the long-term, drinking above the lower-risk guidelines can also lead to cancers, such as bowel and liver cancer, heart disorders and impotence for men.

From 2007–2010 20,000 under 18s were admitted to hospital in England as a result of drinking alcohol.⁴

⁴ North West Public Health Observatory, LAPE 2010: lape.org.uk
Alcohol + young people = risky business

Young people are more likely to take risks. This is because of the hormonal changes you go through at puberty. Alcohol can further impair your judgement, leaving you vulnerable to:

**Taking risks**
Research found that over a third (34%) of 16 and 17 year olds surveyed had walked home alone at night in the dark when drunk.5

**Having unprotected sex**
Drankaware research shows a quarter (25%) of 16 and 17 year olds had been drinking alcohol the first time they had sex without a condom.6

**Drink driving**
In a 2007 survey, one in five (19%) of 17–18 year olds polled admitted to drink driving, while a third (32%) had been a passenger in a car with a driver who was drunk.7

**Antisocial behaviour and crime**
Drinking has led over a quarter (28%) of 14 to 15 year olds to cause criminal damage and 10% of 15 to 16 year olds to get into trouble with the police.8

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5 OnePoll research for Drinkaware and Brook. Total sample size was 1,000 16-17 year olds in the UK. Fieldwork was undertaken between 11th and 15th November 2009. The survey was carried out online.

6 Ibid.


9 http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Yourchildshealthandsafety/Youngpeopleandalcohol/DG_183848

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One in five girls (and one in 10 boys) aged 14 to 15 goes further than they wanted to in a sexual experience after drinking alcohol.9
Most young people don’t like being drunk

Almost three quarters of young people we spoke to who were underage drinkers said they do not like being drunk and over two thirds feel ashamed when they drink too much. While that might be a very different picture from the ‘Binge Britain’ headlines we’re all used to seeing in our newspapers, it’s exactly what we found out when we asked 600 15–17 year olds a series of questions around alcohol.

Peer pressure
Over a third (36%) of the young people we interviewed said peer pressure was the main reason for having drunk alcohol in the last week. But despite feeling the need to drink alcohol to fit in with their friends, the majority (61%) of those interviewed only occasionally or rarely drink.

It may feel like everyone’s drinking, but talk to your friends – are you all just trying to impress other people? If you do feel pressure to drink, try making a joke of the situation and tease your friends for trying to make you drink. It’s okay to walk away, say no and stand up to the people egging you on if you don’t want to try a sip or finish a whole drink.

And while you probably think that talking to your parents about alcohol is the last thing you want to do, you might be surprised to learn about their own experiences. The sooner you start talking, the better.

Your parents are best placed to give you the facts about alcohol. Evidence shows that nearly three-quarters of children aged 9–17 would turn to their parents first for information and advice on alcohol, so you wont be the only one talking to your mum or dad about drinking.

The majority (90%) of parents agree it is up to them to set a good example to their children through their own drinking habits.

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10 OnePoll research for Drinkaware and Brook. Total sample size was 1,000 16-17 year olds in the UK. Fieldwork was undertaken between 11th and 15th November 2009. The survey was carried out online.
12 ibid.
The facts about alcohol and young people

It is against the law:
• To sell alcohol to someone under 18 anywhere
• For an adult to buy or attempt to buy alcohol on behalf of someone under 18
• For someone under 18 to buy alcohol, attempt to buy alcohol or to be sold alcohol
• For someone under 18 to drink alcohol in licensed premises, except where the child is 16 or 17 years old and accompanied by an adult. In this case it is legal for them to drink, but not buy, beer, wine and cider with a table meal
• For an adult to buy alcohol for someone under 18 for consumption on licensed premises, except as above

It is not illegal:
• For someone over 18 to buy a child over 16 beer, wine or cider if they are eating a table meal together in licensed premises.
• For a child aged 5 to 16 to drink alcohol at home or on other private premises

If police suspect someone under 18 has alcohol in a public place, they have the power to confiscate it and if young people get caught with alcohol three times they could face a fine or arrest. Gaining a criminal record could affect your future job prospects and make it more difficult to travel to countries like the USA. The police can also confiscate alcohol from someone, no matter what their age, if they believe it has been or will be drunk by someone under 18 in a public place.

The Chief Medical Officer’s (CMO) guidance on young people and alcohol

Health experts advise that an alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option. However, if you do drink alcohol, the CMO has issued the following guidance:

• Young people should not drink at all until they are at least 15 years old
• If young people aged 15 to 17 years drink alcohol, it should always be under the supervision of a parent or carer
• If 15 to 17 year olds do drink, it should not be often – certainly no more than one day a week
• 15 to 17 year olds should not drink more than the daily guideline amount for adults
The government advises that people should not regularly drink more than the daily unit guidelines of 3–4 units of alcohol for men (equivalent to a pint and a half of 4% beer) and 2–3 units of alcohol for women (equivalent to a 175 ml glass of 13% wine). ‘Regularly’ means drinking every day or most days of the week.

Staying in control

The facts about alcohol and young people

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If you are drinking alcohol or feeling under pressure to drink, here are three tips to help you stay safe:

**A. Eat up.**
Make sure you eat a proper meal before you go out. A full stomach will help slow down the rate their body absorbs alcohol, so it won’t go to your head so quickly. Starchy food like pasta is best.

**B. Mobile power.**
Remember to charge your mobile before you go out and make sure you have plenty of credit. Call your parents at any time, day or night, if you’re in trouble.

**C. Don’t mix.**
Stick to one type of alcohol. Mixing drinks makes it harder to keep track of how much you’ve had. Make sure you know which drinks are stronger than others.
We’ve got the answers at drinkaware.co.uk

Advice

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Further information

For the facts on alcohol visit the Drinkaware website drinkaware.co.uk

If you’re concerned about your friend’s drinking, or your own, Drinkline runs a free, confidential helpline. Call 0800 917 8282.

Visit The Site and Talk To Frank for regularly updated guides that take a comprehensive look at alcohol, drugs and much more – www.thesite.org and talktofrank.com.