

# Know... the effects of alcohol

Many people enjoy a drink without any problems. But binge drinking or drinking heavily over longer periods of time can have very serious consequences. Alcohol misuse not only harms the individual but is damaging to relationships and society in general in terms of violence and crime, accidents and drink driving.

In Northern Ireland, the number of alcohol-related deaths has more than doubled since 1994. The most recent figures show:

- there were 283 deaths recorded as alcohol-related;
- there were over 8,000 alcohol-related admissions to hospitals in Northern Ireland.

## Long-term effects

As well as the recognised immediate effects of drinking too much, like nausea/vomiting, binge drinking and prolonged heavy drinking over longer periods of time can affect you in many different ways.

### Brain damage

Binge drinking can cause blackouts, memory loss and anxiety. Long-term drinking can result in permanent brain damage, serious mental health problems and alcohol dependence or alcoholism. Young people's brains are particularly vulnerable because the brain is still developing during their teenage years. Alcohol can damage parts of the brain, affecting behaviour and the ability to learn and remember.

### Cancers

Drinking alcohol is the second biggest risk factor for cancers of the mouth and throat (smoking being the first). People who develop cirrhosis of the liver (often caused by too much alcohol) can develop liver cancer.

### Heart and circulation

Alcohol can cause high blood pressure (hypertension) increasing the risk of having a heart attack or stroke. It also weakens heart muscles, which can affect lungs, liver, brain and other body systems and can cause heart failure. Binge drinking and drinking heavily over longer periods can cause the heart to beat irregularly (arrhythmia) and has been linked to cases of sudden death.

### Lungs

People who drink a lot of alcohol have more lung infections and can be more likely to get pneumonia and for their lungs to collapse. When a person vomits as a result of drinking alcohol they may choke if vomit gets sucked into their lungs.

### Liver

Drinking too much alcohol initially causes fat deposits to develop in the liver. With continued excessive drinking the liver may become inflamed resulting in alcoholic hepatitis which can result in liver failure and death. Excessive alcohol can

permanently scar and damage the liver resulting in liver cirrhosis and an increased risk of liver cancer. Women are particularly susceptible to the effects of alcohol on the liver.

### **Stomach**

Drinking above recommended limits can lead to stomach ulcers, internal bleeding and cancer. Alcohol can cause the stomach to become inflamed (gastritis), which can prevent food from being absorbed and increase the risk of cancer.

### **Pancreas**

Heavy or prolonged use of alcohol can cause inflammation of the pancreas, which can be very painful, causing vomiting, fever and weight loss, and can be fatal.

### **Intestine**

Heavy drinking may result in ulcers and cancer of the colon. It also affects your body's ability to absorb nutrients and vitamins.

### **Kidneys**

Heavy drinking can increase your risk of developing high blood pressure – a leading cause of chronic kidney disease.

### **Fertility**

In men: impotence (lowered libido/sex drive) and infertility.

In women: infertility. Drinking alcohol when pregnant can seriously damage the development of the unborn baby.

### **Bones**

Alcohol interferes with the body's ability to absorb calcium. As a result, your bones become weak and thin (osteoporosis).

### **Weight gain**

Alcohol is high in calories. Weight for weight, the alcohol in a drink contains almost as many calories as fat. The average bottle of wine contains 600 calories while four pints of average strength lager contains 640.

### **Skin**

Alcohol dehydrates your body and your skin; it also widens blood vessels causing your skin to look red or blotchy.

### **Sexual health**

Binge drinking makes you lose your inhibitions and affects your judgement. This might make you less likely to use a condom, increasing your risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection such as chlamydia, HIV or hepatitis or result in an unplanned pregnancy.

### **Mental health**

People may think alcohol helps them to cope with difficult situations and emotions, to reduce stress or relieve anxiety, but alcohol is in fact associated with a range of mental health problems including depression, anxiety, risk-taking behaviour, personality disorders and schizophrenia.

Alcohol has also been linked to suicide. The Mental Health Foundation<sup>1</sup> reports that:

- 65% of suicides have been linked to excessive drinking;
- 70% of men who kill themselves have drunk alcohol before doing so;
- almost one third of suicides among young people take place while the person is intoxicated.

Excessive drinking can disrupt normal sleeping patterns resulting in insomnia and a lack of restful sleep which can contribute to stress and anxiety.

<sup>1</sup>**Mental Health Foundation. Cheers! Understanding the relationship between alcohol and mental health. London: Mental Health Foundation, 2006.**

## Other effects

Alcohol affects the parts of your brain that control judgment, concentration, coordination, behaviour and emotions. If you are binge drinking, you may be at greater risk of:

- becoming a victim of crime, eg rape, domestic violence, mugging or assault;
- being involved in antisocial or criminal behaviour, eg fights, domestic violence, vandalism or theft;
- having an accident, eg a road accident, fall, accident at work or accidental fire;
- losing your job, eg repeated absence or poor performance. Think about the financial consequences;
- damaging relationships with family or friends.