

Young people: alcohol and drugs



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alcohol.ie

Your attitude towards alcohol when you are young can affect your health and your future life in many ways. Alcohol marketing says you need alcohol to socialise, have ‘fun’, and be popular – but this is their marketing ploy to increase profits – not fact. The reality is that drinking too much alcohol when you are young can:

- delay the development of your coping, personal and social skills;
- impair judgement and put you in a multitude of different risky situations;
- set you up for future physical and mental health difficulties;
- affect the quality of your life experiences through drunkenness, shame, embarrassment and hangovers;
- harm your academic, sporting, hobby and other talents; and
- increase your risk of alcohol dependence later in life

Remember that alcohol will have a more negative effect on you than on an adult because your body and brain is still developing until your mid-20s.

What’s the harm?

Alcohol can cause long-term damage to your brain

Alcohol can impair two important parts of the developing brain:

- the area responsible for logic, reasoning, self-regulation and judgement; and
- the area related to learning, problem-solving and memory

This means that your memory and ability to think clearly as well as your capacity to learn and

integrate new information, whether in school or in life generally, may be affected.

Also, the teenage brain is more likely to become dependent on alcohol than the adult brain. For instance, if you begin drinking before the age of 15, you are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than someone who starts in their early 20s or older. No-one ever sets out to become dependent on alcohol, but the chances of this happening increase if you start drinking too soon.

Alcohol can lead to depression and anxiety

People often use alcohol to boost their mood or help cope with a situation they think would be difficult to manage without drinking. In the short-term this may seem like a good idea, but alcohol can leave you feeling down, anxious and less able to cope. This is because alcohol is a depressant drug. Sometimes people get into a vicious cycle where they drink to counter the feelings of vulnerability or emotional fragility caused by too much alcohol.

Alcohol can stop you building inner strength

Using alcohol to give you ‘false courage’, or to avoid difficult feelings can mean you miss the chance to learn vital coping, personal and social skills. It’s really important to learn these skills as they build the inner resilience that will help you to cope with challenges, problems and difficult times throughout your life.

Alcohol can make you more vulnerable

Being a teenager can be tough, especially as you work your way through new experiences, roles and stressful situations. Adding alcohol to these situations can make you more likely to behave in a risky way, which can harm you or others, and make

you feel ashamed, guilty, and full of regrets. Also, when you are under the influence of alcohol, other people may take advantage of you. Alcohol lowers inhibitions and may lead to one doing things they would never do if sober. Being drunk increases our chances of being in an accident, drowning, falling, engaging in self harm, being vulnerable to suicidal thoughts, as well as being vulnerable to sexual or physical assault.

Alcohol and risky behaviour

Young people sometimes make emotional decisions on the spur of the moment without really thinking about the consequences of their actions. This is because the parts of the brain responsible for impulse control don't fully mature until about 25 years of age.

Alcohol can make you even more likely to make decisions you may regret later including engaging in sexual activity that may involve unprotected sex. Drinking alcohol can affect your judgement and ability to spot danger or react to it. You may lose your temper and upset people close to you. This is why, after drinking, one is more likely to engage in socially inappropriate behaviours, hurt someone or get hurt oneself, whether through drink-driving, falling, fights, accidents, drowning, self-harm, even suicide attempts.

It can be hard to deal with the aftermath of losing control as there may be long lasting consequences on one's self-image, emotional health, friendships, family and work. You may even get into trouble with the law.

Alcohol causes health and other problems

Drinking alcohol at a young age can cause a range of problems. You probably won't do as well as you could in school or in sports. Your energy

levels may be lower and you could have problems sleeping, suffer skin blemishes and put on excess weight. Drinking too much can also affect your relationships with your family and friends. Long-term problems can include heart disease, liver disease and several types of cancer.

Greater health risk for girls

Girls and young women are at greater risk as they absorb more alcohol than boys and young men. It takes less alcohol to cause the same levels of damage to girls and young women, both in the short term and the long term.

Alcohol and other substances

Mixing alcohol and 'tablets': Mixing alcohol and different types of medicines such as sleeping tablets, tranquillisers, cough mixtures, cold and flu tablets, and anti-depressants can be dangerous because the effects – and side effects – are added together to give a much bigger overall effect. If you take this type of 'chemical cocktail', it is hard to predict what the consequences will be.

Alcohol and cannabis: Having alcohol in your bloodstream can compound the adverse effects that may be experienced after taking cannabis, thus leading to the experience of dizziness, vomiting, panic, anxiety and paranoia.

Alcohol and cocaine: If you take these two drugs together, it can increase your risk of heart attack and even death because the two drugs interact to produce a highly toxic (poisonous) substance in your liver. This unique chemical is called Cocaethylene.

Alcohol and ecstasy (MDMA): Alcohol might 'deaden' the high from ecstasy but the next day you could feel much worse when you 'come down'

from the effects of the drug. Alcohol is involved in many ecstasy-related deaths. Many of these result from heatstroke after people have danced for a long time in a hot club. Alcohol dehydrates the body even more, so the two together are a dangerous combination. The MDMA content of Ecstasy may also be much higher than you think. Alcohol and heroin: Alcohol and heroin are two of the most dangerous drugs to take together. They can slow your heart rate and breathing to dangerous levels leading to coma and death in some cases.

If you feel that drinking is having a bad effect on your life or is stopping you from being the person you want to be, you can choose to stop or cut down. Less alcohol is better when it comes to minding your physical and mental health.

Alcohol and dependence

The earlier you start to drink, the greater your chance of developing problems with alcohol later in life. People who drink heavily as adults generally began drinking in their teens. If there is a history of alcohol or drug-related problems in your family, you are more likely to develop a problem.

Alcohol and mood

It's hard to predict the effect that alcohol can have on your mood. You may feel better shortly after you start drinking, but alcohol can bring difficult feelings to the surface, or make them feel more intense. This is one of the reasons why many people become upset, angry or aggressive when drinking.

It can be particularly hard to manage these intense feelings if you are already going through a tough time.

Alcohol is a depressant. This means it reduces the natural, chemicals in your brain that cause pleasant feelings. This can make you feel low the next day and make existing problems seem worse, especially if you have a hangover and are feeling sick. Over time, this low feeling can affect your talents, self esteem and goals. It can also be associated with episodes of self harm and in some cases suicide. This is why it's important to watch how much and how often you drink.

If you feel depressed, miserable or hopeless, get help, not drunk. If someone close to you seems depressed or hopeless, try and get them to get help.

Even if you can't change a situation, you can deal with it in a way that doesn't make things worse. Finding a way to cope without alcohol can help you to manage better the next time. Talk to someone you trust such as a family member, friend, your GP, the Drug & Alcohol Helpline, or the mental health services.

Everyone goes through tough times. Finding healthy ways to cope with life's challenges can make your stronger and happier.

Binge drinking

Binge drinking means drinking a large amount of alcohol in a short space of time. This way of drinking is particularly harmful as it increases the risk to your health and makes you more likely to make poor decisions, have accidents, get injured, even self-harm.

Binge drinking is defined as six or more standard drinks in one session. Did you know that one can of beer is equal to two standard drinks, a 'naggin' of vodka contains more than six standard drinks and a bottle of wine has about seven and a half standard drinks? You can really rack up the amount of standard drinks you are taking in and you may get drunk very quickly. See the drinks calculator on www.askaboutalcohol.ie to work out how much you really drink on a night out.

In Ireland, we have very high levels of binge drinking. This can make it hard to recognise binge drinking as an abnormal and harmful behaviour. If a lot of people around you are drinking a lot, it might seem acceptable or even safe, despite the damage it causes to your body, mind, family and community. Try to delay starting to drink for as long as possible. If you drink and are over 18, pace and space your drinks. Keep to the standard drink recommendations. Have at least two days without alcohol in a week. And avoid binge drinking – spread drinking over the week. If you do drink, try and retain your personal health as your priority.

Don't be one of the many people who looks back after years of heavy drinking and regrets the loss of their potential in school and college, sport, hobbies and relationships. The best advice is always to drink less and 'live life to the full' more.

The “Real You”

Are you drinking to feel more confident? Is this a false confidence? If so be yourself, your natural self. We all have flaws and we all have talents. Real confidence is accepting both. Show others the real you without the mask of drink. If you value and respect yourself without drink, others will value and respect you too. Accept yourself for who you are. If you do, others will. This will give you the taste and 'buzz' of real confidence.

You and your peers

Are you using alcohol to gain a sense of belonging and to fit in or be part of the 'cool gang' or to avoid being 'slagged'? If so, ask yourself do independent minded adults really need drink to establish a sense of belonging? No, they don't.

If your friends pressure you into drinking, ask why do they need to do this? Are they trying to make themselves feel better about their own drinking? Do real friends really need drink to accept each other? Do real friends really need drink to accept each other? You don't have to drink to be a member of the 'cool gang' if you have friends who value your company, respect you and accept you for who you are. You are already in to the 'cool gang'. Remember, older teenagers will tell you that what was 'slagging' for not drinking will later turn to respect. So, be your real self. Show your real self, and watch your real friends accept what they see.

Coping with someone else's drinking or drug use

If a friend or someone in your immediate family is a problem drinker or drug user, it can leave you and your family feeling unhappy, angry, scared, confused, and guilty.

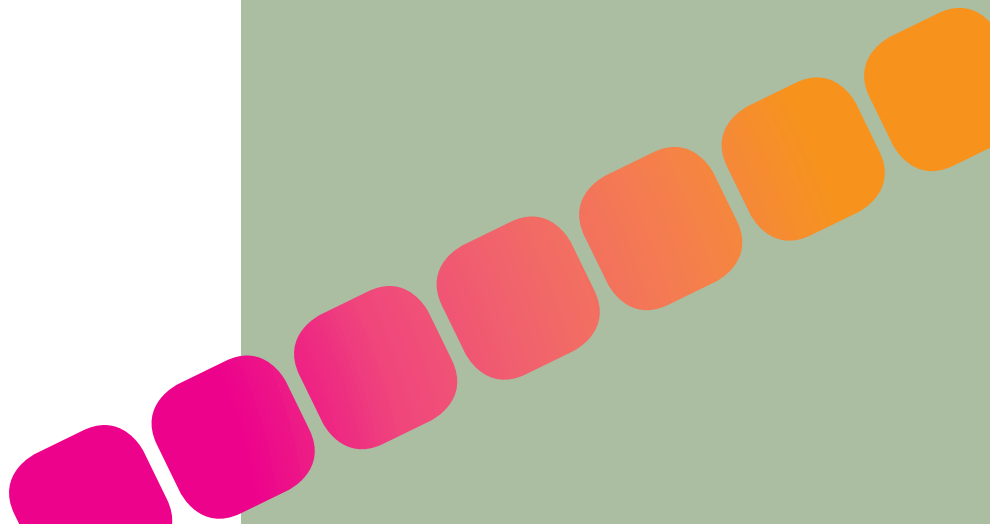
You may need help to learn how to deal with their moods and behaviours.


For further information on "Helping Teenagers to Cope with a Parent's Problem Drug or Alcohol Use"

Read:

<https://www.barnardos.ie/assets/files/publications/free/Teenagers%20and%20Parents%20Drug%20use%20web.pdf>

See [askaboutalcohol.ie/My Family & Alcohol](http://askaboutalcohol.ie/My%20Family%20&%20Alcohol)





If you are concerned about your drinking pattern, talk to someone you trust – a family member, friend, health professional or your GP.

Contact the Alcohol and Drugs Helpline on **1800 459 459**.

Visit **askaboutalcohol.ie** to find out more including details of support services.

Email **helpline@hse.ie** Monday to Friday from 9.30am to 5.30pm.

Visit **drugs.ie** for all the up-to-date information on drugs.