

## Alcohol

Despite its association with everyday socialising and its legal status Alcohol is in fact a drug every bit as dangerous as other illicit drugs. Alcohol relieves anxiety, lifts inhibitions and it is pleasantly, mildly euphoric but when used to excess it is dangerous causing misery, illness and death. Is it a friend or foe? Surprisingly alcohol is not particularly addictive; unlike for example cocaine or heroin and for the vast majority of people who drink, it does not become a problem. However, alcohol abuse and dependency are real issues for about 8% of the adult population with significant consequences for themselves, their families and society as a whole.

### Safe Drinking

Over 90% of the adult population are not dependent on alcohol but nevertheless some may have problems from drinking too much or inappropriately. A proportion will go on to drink more and eventually lose control so alcohol has an ability to slowly cause addiction over many years. The UK Government along with many other governments in the Western World has produced guidelines on sensible drinking and the recent trend in the UK towards binge drinking by young women is a worrying new direction.

The unit system introduced by the British Government gives a fair estimation of how much is drunk and how safe it is. The limits are: 21 units for men per week and 14 units for women. More recent advice has changed this to a daily limit of 4 units for men with 2 days abstinence weekly and 3 units daily for women with 2 days a week with no alcohol. It is important to note here that there is a fundamental difference between the male and the female body. A lower proportion of the female body is made up of water compared to men, so women are therefore at greater risk from the effects of alcohol on their bodies.

### What are 'units' of alcohol?

Calculating the amount of units you are drinking is easy. A fairly accurate guide is one litre of the alcoholic beverage is equal in units to the percentage alcohol of the drink. One litre of beer of 4.6% alcohol is 4.6 units; one litre of Gin at 40% alcohol is 40 units. Spirits are sold in 25 ml measures and there are 40 measures in a litre bottle. Therefore 1 single measure of spirit is equal to 1 unit of alcohol. Simple isn't it? The average man can safely drink 21 single measures of spirits or 4 litres of beer per week and a woman can drink 14 single measures of spirits or 11/2 litres of wine. A word of caution: These drinks should be spread evenly across the week and there should be at least two alcohol free days per week. The setting and time of drinking is also important when assessing safety.

The unit system is only a guide and does not represent a definition of when drinking is acceptable on health. For some people, just a couple of drinks triggers a change in personality, affecting relationships and to drink before driving always impairs performance and judgement. For these people, avoiding alcohol altogether is probably the best policy.

Although alcohol is not a particularly addictive drug it does in time lead to dependency. The average time is usually between 5 and 7 years. The route to alcohol dependency is not a predictable one; the drinker often cannot foresee it. Damage to relationships, poor work performance and a bad health record are a few of the signs of addictive behaviours. If you have lost the ability to say 'no' to a drink and you can't stop when you start, you have a serious problem that needs to be addressed.

One final word of caution: binge drinking is an extremely dangerous occupation for drinkers of all ages. For drinkers under the age of 23 or 24 it has further hidden dangers in that the human brain is still developing up until this age and excessive use of alcohol can lead to under-development of the brain. Often this leads to under achievement and potential never been reached.

### **Abuse or dependency?**

A professional assessment is necessary to accurately diagnose an alcohol abuse or addiction problem but there are self-administered questionnaires which help identify which is the problem. One of these tools is '**CAGE**' which consists of four questions related to behaviour surrounding drinking. Another useful self-administered tool is the **AUDIT** Questionnaire.

It is a very fine line between harmful alcohol use and alcohol dependency. After dependency is established, it is difficult to return to controlled drinking and abstinence is often the only option. Problem drinking or alcohol abuse occurs when a person is not dependent on alcohol, but drinks enough to cause actual harm. The amount of alcohol consumed on a regular basis is not important in the definition of alcohol abuse; what is important is that alcohol is affecting your daily life or the lives of those around you.

### **Alcohol Dependence (Addiction)**

Any drug, which causes changes to the mind, can cause a dependence syndrome. This means there are symptoms and behavioural patterns which form a recognised illness:

There is a strong desire or compulsion to drink, which overrides other everyday activities; family, friends, work and hobbies are neglected. They neglect the alternative pleasures of life as the alcohol drinking becomes the major focus for the individual.

Alcohol normally has a physical withdrawal state when the drinking stops. Nausea, sweating, shakiness and anxiety are typical symptoms.

There is a degree of tolerance requiring higher doses to have the same psychological effect. There are difficulties in controlling the amount of use so consumption escalates.

The user continues to consume alcohol despite evidence of harm such as ill health, debts, relationship difficulties or psychological problems.

The people most at risk of alcohol dependency are those who have difficulty dealing with their emotions and who have trouble in facing everyday life. Alcohol is used as an "escape mechanism" for life's

problems rather than confronting them. There is an increased risk for those who are shy, with low self-esteem and have problems with family/work. There are genetic risks for susceptibility to addiction. Research, particularly in the USA, shows that the risk for developing alcohol addiction does run in families. The genes a person inherits partially explain this pattern but lifestyle and psychological environment are also factors. However, a genetic predisposition to alcohol addiction does not mean it is inevitable; just because alcohol addiction tends to run in families, it does not mean that a child of an alcoholic parent will automatically become an alcoholic too. Some people develop alcoholism even though no one in their family has a drinking problem.

### **Effects on the Body and Brain**

Alcohol causes Liver disease, Pancreatitis, seizures, impotence, severe short term memory loss, hypertension (which can lead to a stroke), enlarged heart, cancer and many other physical and psychological problems. Alcohol suppresses the part of the brain that controls judgement, resulting in a loss of inhibitions. It affects physical co-ordination, causing blurred vision, slurred speech and loss of balance. Drinking a very large amount at one time can lead to unconsciousness, coma and even death. Vomiting while unconscious can lead to death by asphyxiation (suffocation). Alcohol is implicated in a large number of fatal road accidents, assaults and incidents of domestic violence. Drinking too much too often will cause physical damage, increase the risk of getting some diseases and make other diseases worse. It is dangerous stuff.

### **Treatment of Alcohol Dependence**

For those with dependence there is usually a repeated pattern of failed attempts to give up without seeking help. There will be a need to be admitted into a [treatment centre](#) in order to address the underlying personal issues which have promoted the dependency and to counteract the effects of the illness itself. Invariably once this stage of dependency is reached, the user will never be able to control alcohol use again and abstinence is the only way forward. A return to drinking will cause a return to the original patterns of use and the vicious circle continues. In-patient treatment looks at all factors hidden behind the dependency, such as relationship problems, previous psychological trauma or self-esteem issues. Some dependency is in conjunction with other psychiatric disorder such as depression. Often the user does not recognise the harm that alcohol is doing to themselves or others (denial) or the social isolation that it is causing. The illness is accompanied by guilt/shame so there is a reluctance to accept help. The therapeutic environment enables the return to previous attributes and the ability to ask for help when there is trouble so that they can view the future with confidence without returning to mind-altering substances. Family relationships, which are also damaged by the illness, can be repaired with the help of treatment.