

Alcohol and young people

Few young people nowadays wait until they're 18 to drink. By the time they reach 15, more than eight out of 10 have already tried alcohol.⁽¹⁾

Newspaper headlines about 'drunk hoodies' may suggest that most young people drink regularly. However, the number of teenagers who drink has actually declined in recent years, but those who do drink are consuming more alcohol, more often.⁽²⁾

While there have been official Government drinking guidelines for adults for many years, until recently there were none for under-18s and their parents. In January 2009, government advice for young people and their parents about alcohol was published by the Chief Medical Officer, Sir Liam Donaldson. It stated that children should not drink before they're 15, and between 15 and 17 they should only drink when they're supervised by a parent or other adult.

The guidance also emphasises the importance of parents' influence on their children's drinking. Attitudes to alcohol can often be passed down from parent to child because children see their parents as role models.

Getting drunk with friends used to be seen as a teenage rite of passage and a way to find out about the side effects of alcohol first-hand. But, according to official figures, today's teenagers are more likely to make binge drinking a regular part of their social life.⁽³⁾

FACTS and FIGURES

How much?

In England, the proportion of young people aged between 11 and 15 who reported having drunk alcohol decreased from six out of 10 to five out of 10, between 1988 and 2007. However, the amount they reported drinking increased from just over six units per week in 1994 to close to 13 units per week in 2007.⁽⁴⁾

The largest increase was seen in 14 year olds, whose reported alcohol consumption rose from around six to just under 10 units per week.⁽⁵⁾

Among 35 European countries, the UK has the third-highest proportion of 15 year olds who report having been drunk 10 times or more in the past year.⁽⁶⁾

Young people at risk

How a teenager copes with alcohol depends on their body size and shape, as well as what stage of puberty they've reached.

In inexperienced hands, alcohol can be very dangerous. Young people are just starting to

discover the effects of alcohol so it's easy for them to inadvertently drink an amount well beyond the recommended guidelines.

In minor cases this will cause the slurring, staggering and sickness associated with being drunk. But the consequences can be much more severe. Statistics show that around 5,000 teenagers are admitted to hospital every year for alcohol-related reasons.⁽⁷⁾

Teenagers who get drunk run other risks, too:

- In a 2007 survey, one in five teenagers admitted to drink driving, while a third (32%) had been a passenger in a car with a driver who was drunk.⁽⁸⁾
- Drinking alcohol can make teenagers forget all about safe sex. Statistics show that after drinking, 11% of young people engaged in unprotected sex in 2007. 11% again claimed to regret that sexual encounter.⁽⁹⁾
- Alcohol plays a big part in antisocial behaviour, crime and violence. A Home Office survey found that one in five (18%) 12-13 year olds and over a quarter (28%) of 14-15 year olds caused damage while drinking, while one in 10 15-16 year olds said that drinking had led them to get in trouble with the police.⁽¹⁰⁾

PROGRESSION

Starting drinking as a young person can result in a greater risk of developing long-term health conditions in later life. Young bodies are still growing, and alcohol can harm their development. Regular drinking can lead to cancer, liver disease, heart disorders and impotence in later life.

Deaths from liver disease have risen sharply in the 25-34 age group over the last 10 years. This is thought to be a consequence of increased drinking starting at an earlier age.⁽¹⁰⁾ Drinking can cause problems with mental development too, with heavy drinking in adolescence leading to learning difficulties later on in life.⁽¹¹⁾

Safety and alcohol

If you become drunk, your judgement is impaired, which can lead to dangerous situations, especially for women.

- A survey on young women and alcohol for *Company* magazine found that two-thirds of respondents had woken up the morning after drinking with almost no recollection of what had happened the night before, while one in 10 had had to be escorted home by a stranger. Three in 10 had lost keys, money and other valuables during a drunken night out.⁽¹⁶⁾
- One survey found that one in six women have had unsafe sex after drinking too much.⁽¹⁷⁾
- The number of women arrested for being drunk and disorderly rose by more than half in five years, up from 3,847 in 2003-04 to 5,891 in 2007.⁽¹⁸⁾

ADVICE and GETTING HELP

A review of evidence commissioned by the Department of Children, Schools and Families concluded that children who first use alcohol at home, and learn about its effects from parents, are less likely to misuse alcohol than those who begin drinking outside the home and experiment with their peers.⁽¹²⁾

So, the earlier you can start talking to your children about alcohol, the better.

Tips on talking to your children

- The effects of alcohol often crop up in soap operas, films and news stories. This can be a good opportunity to introduce the topic.
- Don't just talk about physical effects, discuss how drinking too much can affect their ability to make decisions and get into situations they otherwise wouldn't.
- Look at your own drinking. Young people learn more from watching their parents than they do from listening to them.
- Know the official guidance on adult alcohol consumption (two to three units of alcohol a day for women, three to four units for men) and tailor your own drinking accordingly so you can pass on realistic messages about what is and isn't a risk when it comes to alcohol.

If you're worried about a young person's drinking, seek professional help. Talk to your doctor, or contact one of the following organisations:

Parentline Plus. 0808 800 2222.

www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Drinkline. 0800 917 8282

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