

# Young People & Alcohol

## A Guide For Parents



# What happens to alcohol in our bodies?

Alcohol is absorbed into our body through the stomach and small intestine. From here, it's distributed throughout the body in the bloodstream, reaching all parts of the body such as the heart, brain, muscles and other tissues. Our bodies cannot store alcohol, so it needs to get rid of it. This is done through the liver.

The liver turns alcohol into a highly toxic substance, then into acetate (a harmless substance). This process can cause scarring on the liver. However, alcohol can also cause short and long-term harm to our bodies, especially in young people. Their brains are still developing into the early twenties, and the effects of alcohol can cause long-term harm to their memory, affecting their education and future career prospects. Depending on how their attitude to alcohol has developed, it could also impact on their lives well into adulthood.

Young people are more at risk to damage caused by alcohol. These include mental health problems, like mood swings and depression. As alcohol is a poison, long-term drinking can also lead to cancer of the colon, pancreas, lips, mouth, and larynx. Even breast cancer has links to alcohol misuse. Alcohol is a factor in heart disease, high blood pressure and strokes. Alcohol can impact on 60 different medical conditions and the damage caused may not be apparent for many years.



# Did you know?

- » Young people who drink are at risk of being involved in anti-social behaviour, crime, sexual assaults, and potentially harming their health in the long term.
- » Around 7% of people who drown have alcohol in their system.
- » Around 50% of all pedestrians aged 16 to 60 who are killed in road accidents have more alcohol in their bloodstream than the legal drink drive limit.
- » 14 to 15-year-olds who drink alcohol are more likely to engage in sexual activity.
- » Young people are more likely to be a victim of violent crime if they are drunk.
- » People in their 20s and 30s are now getting cirrhosis and other alcohol related diseases. This is due to drinking alcohol at a younger age and drinking large amounts of stronger drinks, like spirits and strong ciders.

## The good news

Since 2001, across the United Kingdom alcohol consumption amongst 11-15-year-olds has been consistently falling year on year. Figures for 2021 show that 97% of 11-year-olds and 76% of 14-year olds have never tried alcohol. With those who have tried it, only 2.5% (11yo) and 16.5% (14yo) had tried it in the past month. (ONS 2020)



# Across the Wakefield District

Using school-based anonymised surveys, in Year 7 & 9 the percentage of young people who have NEVER tried alcohol has increased from 29% to 39% in the last five years\*. Evidence from young people also suggests that when young people do drink alcohol, they tend to get the alcohol from parents\*\*. A young person binge drinking has been found to be a good indicator to problematic alcohol misuse as they get older, having a negative impact on their health and social outcomes.

(\*Wakefield Council Health Improvement Team 2021 & \*\*Community Alcohol Partnerships 2020)

## Alcohol poisoning

**Too much alcohol at any one time affects your body in two ways that can be dangerous:**

- » it stops the brain working effectively, and
- » it makes us feel sick.

Your brain controls the heart, breathing and body temperature. It is like a thermostat that controls our body's central heating system or boiler. If we drink too much, the brain forgets to

control our body temperature and the body winds down until something stops – like the heart!

Another effect of drinking too much alcohol at once is that it will cause you to feel sick and be sick. There is a high risk that if you are drunk, unconscious, or asleep and start vomiting, you could choke to death. This is due to alcohol relaxing your natural gag reflex. Even worse, being sick in this way can trigger an instant nerve reflex that stops the heart dead.

# Alcohol and you

Children usually become aware of alcohol and drinking from an early age. There's a lot you can do to influence your children in a positive way, so they can make responsible decisions about alcohol in the future. Here is some information to help you along the way.

## It's the law

The law is there not to criminalise young people, but to protect them from harm. Therefore, you have to be 18 or over to buy alcohol.

You can be stopped, fined or arrested by police if you're under 18 and drinking alcohol in public.

If you're under 18, it's against the law:

- » for someone to sell you alcohol.
- » to buy or try to buy alcohol.
- » for an adult to buy or try to buy alcohol for you.
- » to drink alcohol in licensed premises (such as a pub or restaurant).

However, if you're 16 or 17 and accompanied by an adult, you can drink (but not buy) beer, wine or cider with a meal.

It is illegal to give alcohol to a child under five.



# Alcohol and sex

Because alcohol increases risk-taking behaviour and impairs judgement, young people who drink are more likely to have sex and are less likely to practice safe sex. This increases their risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and an increased risk of unwanted pregnancy or involvement in sexual assault.

For more information on sexual health, Spectrum's clinic offers high-quality, free, discreet, confidential and non-judgemental sexual health advice, STI testing (including HIV), treatment, cervical screening, counselling, contraception (including emergency contraception) and pregnancy testing.

## Contact:

Trinity Walk Clinic  
Unit LG1A  
Trinity Walk Shopping Centre  
Wakefield  
WF1 1QS

Tel:  
**0800 121 4860**

Email:  
**[wakefield.sharp@spectrum-cic.nhs.uk](mailto:wakefield.sharp@spectrum-cic.nhs.uk)**

For more information visit:  
**[www.spectrumhealth.org.uk](http://www.spectrumhealth.org.uk)**



# Talking to young people about alcohol

On a scale of 1-10, how confident would you be talking with your child about the harms and risks of drinking alcohol?

NOT VERY

VERY

- ①    ②    ③    ④    ⑤    ⑥    ⑦    ⑧    ⑨    ⑩

## If your child is 8-11

This is the age when some children may have their first taste of alcohol. On special occasions, you may choose to let them have a sip. However, do remember that it is illegal to give alcohol to children under the age of five.

## If your child is 12-14

At this age, some children may start drinking at parties and friends' houses. This is a good age to explain how alcohol affects the body and what can happen when people drink too much. If you find they've been drinking without your permission, stay calm.

Listen, try to understand what happened and talk about ways to avoid it from happening again.

## If your child is 15-17

Some teenagers of this age are beginning to drink on a regular basis. At this age, they're highly influenced by people of their own age group and slightly older, e.g. like young adults, the age group most likely to binge drink. Make sure you know where they are and who they're with. Be clear that you're still in charge – but only because you care about their safety, health, and their future.

Studies have shown that young people understand the issues and the harm around alcohol misuse, but they also say that the biggest influences in their lives are their parents.

Use of Alcohol among children and young people. (Department for children, schools and families 2008)



@SpectrumSHARP

## UK Chief Medical Officer Guidance, England and Northern Ireland

Children and their parents/carers are advised that an alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option.

However, if children do drink alcohol underage, it should not be until at least the age of 15 years.

If young people aged 15 to 17 years consume alcohol, it should always be with the guidance of a parent or carer, or in a supervised environment. Parents and young people should be aware that drinking, even at age 15 or older, can be hazardous to health and that not drinking is the healthiest option for young people.

If 15 to 17-year-olds do consume alcohol, they should limit it to no more than one day a week. Young people aged 15 to 17 years should never exceed the UK Chief Medical Officers' low risk drinking guidelines - men and women should drink no more than 14 units a week.

*If you feel you need help or wish to talk to someone about any drug or alcohol misuse issues, please contact Inspiring Futures.*

### Inspiring Futures:

The Young Persons, Young Adults, Families & Carers Drug & Alcohol Service across the Wakefield District - a dedicated specialist service for those under 25 and their families.

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E: Wakefield-IF@turning-point.co.uk

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