



A QUICK GUIDE TO ALCOHOL

Alcohol is so much part of UK culture that most people don't regard it as a drug. But given that the widely accepted definition of a drug is "a substance that has a physiological effect when introduced to the body", alcohol most definitely is, and an incredibly common one at that.

This quick guide, developed in conjunction with [Tooled Up Education](#), covers the most important things that parents and carers need to know about alcohol, as well as signposting to further sources of information.

Please note that the information in this guide refers to UK guidance and law, and may be different in other locations. However, advice on how to talk to young people is equally applicable wherever you live.



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The drug education charity

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WHAT IS ALCOHOL?

When there is talk of “drinking”, many people would infer that this involves alcohol rather than water or any other beverage. This perhaps reflects how embedded alcohol is in modern culture, partly because of how visible it is through depictions in the media and advertising, and this in turn very much normalises it, almost as a recreational activity. This is an important point for parents to keep in mind: how much social influences make alcohol a part of everyday life, both for their generation and those that come after.

Know your limits

This bottle contains
6 glasses

Units of alcohol
per 125ml glass
and 75cl bottle

1.6
2.0
9.8
UK
UNIT

Government guidelines
Do not regularly exceed:

Women	2-3 units daily
Men	3-4 units daily

**Avoid alcohol if pregnant
or trying to conceive**
www.drinkaware.co.uk

Example of wine bottle alcoholic units information labelling

The range of alcoholic beverages is vast, in terms of flavour, appearance and, most importantly, strength. Some products contain very little alcohol and others contain considerably more. In the UK, any beverage that contains [1.2% or more alcohol by volume](#) (ABV) must have [information on the label](#) about the alcohol content, expressed as the number of standard drinks (units) in the container. The term “unit” was introduced to enable different products to be compared. Receptacles containing multiple servings usually state the number of units in a standard serving. In the UK, there is also a requirement for a warning about consuming alcohol during pregnancy reflecting low risk drinking guidelines, and signposting to the charity Drinkaware which provides alcohol health-related information.

Understanding units is also handy to help individuals to approximate when the alcohol they have drunk will be out of their system. The liver can clear one unit of alcohol per hour though it takes a while to get going. So in the first hour after drinking, nothing is cleared at all.

In the UK, the [laws around alcohol](#) are a little complex, but broadly:

CHALLENGE 21



It is illegal for under 18s to buy alcohol in a pub, off-licence, supermarket or online. Many retailers participate in the Challenge 21 scheme where anyone who looks under 21 (or sometimes 25) will be refused the sale unless they can prove their age.



Alcohol can be confiscated from under 18s by the police in public places.



It is against the law to purchase alcohol for someone aged under 18 unless it is a lower alcohol product such as beer or cider (ie. not spirits) for a 16 or 17 year old to have with a meal while accompanied by an adult.



It is illegal to give alcohol to children under five years old.

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WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

[NHS data](#) shows alcohol to be the substance 11-15 year olds are most likely to use, with 40% saying they have had an alcoholic drink. 6% of those surveyed in this age group said they usually drank alcohol once a week, with the proportion increasing with age from 1% of 11 year olds to 14% of 15 year olds. Over a fifth of 15 year olds said they had been drunk in the last four weeks. Of 11-15 year olds who had been drunk in the last month, nearly half said they'd felt ill, over a quarter said they'd been sick, 17% had had an argument, 15% damaged clothes or other items, and 13% lost money or other possessions. It is worth noting that these numbers have fallen in recent years, as is the case in younger adults, with [NHS data](#) showing that around a third of 18-24 year olds in England said that they hadn't drunk any alcohol at all in the last year.

Since 2009, there has been [guidance](#) in place aimed specifically at alcohol use in children and young people, which states that the healthiest and safest option is to remain alcohol-free until **18 years of age**. For those who drink alcohol under this age, guidance suggests that 15-17 year olds should drink once a week at most and only under supervision, and that young people below the age of 15 years should abstain from alcohol completely. This is due to clear evidence that drinking at a young age, and particularly heavy or regular drinking, can result in accidents and injuries, physical and mental health problems, and impaired brain development. There are also broader implications, such as missing or falling behind at school (and an increased chance of being temporarily or permanently excluded), and violent, antisocial and unsafe sexual behaviours.



[Drinking alcohol at a young age](#) is a factor associated with drinking too much and becoming dependent on it. [Alcoholism](#) is more common than most people think. This is partly because alcohol is an incredibly addictive substance, right up there with nicotine, though there are complex factors involved in the science of addiction. Alcoholism means that the individual has lost control of their drinking and is likely to suffer withdrawal effects if they stop. These will be alleviated if they have some alcohol, and so the cycle restarts. Other risk factors for dependence include using alcohol as a coping strategy and [adverse childhood experiences](#), which range from abuse and neglect to witnessing parental relationship breakdown or mental health problems.

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WHAT IS THE IMPACT?

Alcohol is quite complicated in terms of what it does to the [brain](#) and [body](#). At first, it increases levels of the feel-good chemical dopamine before having a depressant effect, which means that functions such as movement, speech and thinking become impaired. This explains how most people act when they've been drinking. Initially, they become more animated and social, but then become disinhibited, lacking concentration, coordination and judgement. This is associated with an increased risk of accidents, injuries and risky behaviours. Someone who continues drinking beyond this point is likely to experience loss of memory and emotional dysregulation – which contribute to blackouts and alcohol-related violence – and may lose consciousness. Breathing can also slow, sometimes to a fatal level. Alcohol poisoning can also occur if someone has consumed too many units in too short a time for the liver to filter out the toxins that are produced.

The [hangover](#) that someone experiences if they have been drinking heavily can include symptoms such as headache, thirst (both of which are related to dehydration), nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light and noise, an upset stomach, low mood and anxiety. Memory and ability to concentrate may also be impaired, and the after-effects of alcohol are known to contribute to people missing education, work and falling into unemployment.

The risks of alcohol extend beyond its immediate effects. Over time, [excessive alcohol use](#) can damage the brain and body, increasing the likelihood of many illnesses including cancer, stroke, heart problems, liver disease, nervous system issues and mental health conditions. It is for all of these reasons that the UK government warns against adults [binge drinking](#), which is defined as more than six or eight units in a single session for females and males respectively. There is also a recommendation to not exceed [14 units per week](#) and those who do drink this much are advised to spread their units evenly over at least three days, and aim to have some alcohol-free days each week.

Any form of mixing drugs is a bad idea and this applies to alcohol too. Some particularly dangerous combinations include alcohol plus another depressant, such as benzodiazepines used for anxiety and insomnia, alcohol and cocaine, which results in a toxic chemical called cocaethylene being produced in the body which can cause potentially lethal damage to the liver and heart, and alcohol plus ketamine, which has been implicated in several fatalities.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

Parents and carers have a significant role to play in helping their children make decisions about drug use, including alcohol. Here are some tips:



Explain units.

Alcohol can be confusing as there are so many different products. It can be very helpful to explain the concept of units by highlighting the information on product packaging or demonstrating what a single unit looks like in beer, wine and vodka, for example.



Remember you are a role model.

Using alcohol as a coping mechanism or stress release after a tough day can normalise this approach to your children, whereas if they see you being responsible with alcohol, it is likely to shape their attitudes to drinking.



Think carefully about offering alcohol at home.

Evidence shows that children given alcohol at home, even under supervision, are more likely to drink unsupervised out of the home.



Highlight the risks of mixing.

A good way into this is talking about medication. Alcohol can increase the sedating properties of some antihistamines used for allergies and hayfever, for example. This is also a way into conversations about the importance of getting help when needed (for example, putting someone who has passed out into the recovery position and calling emergency services).



Talk about how to cope with adversity.

[Resilience](#) is a vital life skill enabling individuals to deal with setbacks and uncertainty when – and it is when, rather than if – they occur, rather than turning to alcohol as an emotional crutch.



Set boundaries.

Take heed of guidance and explain this to your child with reference to your expectations for them when it comes to drinking alcohol. It is pretty difficult to argue against hard scientific evidence.

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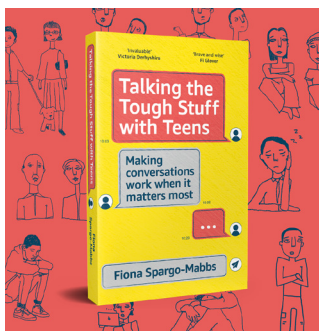
WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

Healthy, open, non-judgemental conversations with young people can be – literally – life-saving.

Fiona Spargo Mabbs OBE, founder and director of the **DSM Foundation** has written two books that are packed with advice and information.

Award-winner, ***I Wish I'd Known***

interweaves the story of one family's terrible loss with calm, measured and practical suggestions for parents about young people, drugs and decisions.



Talking the Tough Stuff with Teens

draws extensively on hundreds of conversations with young people and parents in focus groups and

school and college workshops, to give a warm and compassionate framework for tackling tough conversations about difficult things, without judgement or anger. It covers everything from curfews and screen time, to sex, self-harm and suicide.



Resources to check out

The DSM Foundation, our drugs education charity, has a number of resources to support parents and carers in their conversations with young people about alcohol including information on the **effects and risks of alcohol**.

The Alcohol Education Trust also has resources

specifically designed for parents on a variety of topics including **role modelling**, **tips on delaying teenage drinking**, and **what the law states**.

Drug Science has useful information on alcohol, **Drinkaware** has lots of facts and statistics on the health effects of drinking, and this ties in with the **Government guidance** mentioned in this guide.

It's important to remember that these resources are not a replacement for clinical or specialist support. If you are worried about your child, always consult your GP or other relevant professional.

Tooled Up Education is thrilled to be collaborating with the DSM Foundation. **Tooled Up** brings evidence-based resources to school communities and enjoys strong relationships with some of the most respected researchers and organisations in the world. The **Tooled Up Team** dedicates its time to studying thousands of hours of research evidence and turning this into easy to use resources, in the form of videos, articles, podcasts, activities and tips to try.