

Understanding the impact of alcohol and its risks



What is alcohol?

Alcohol, specifically ethanol, is a psychoactive substance found in drinks like beer, wine, and spirits. It's made through fermentation, where yeast breaks down sugars to produce alcohol. While alcohol is a common part of social events and cultural traditions, it's important to understand its effects on the body and mind.

Alcohol is a depressant, meaning it slows down the central nervous system, affecting everything from judgment to coordination. Drinking in moderation may feel harmless, but excessive or regular consumption can have serious consequences for health, wellbeing, and relationships.

Key facts about alcohol

Alcohol is one of the most widely used substances in the UK, but how much do we really know about its impact?

How many people drink?

In England, around **56%** of adults reported drinking alcohol in the past week, with men (**61%**) more likely to drink than women (**51%**). The highest levels of drinking are seen in middle-aged groups (Research briefings).

How much is too much?

To keep health risks low, the NHS recommends that both men and women consume no more than **14 units** of alcohol per week. That's roughly six pints of beer or six medium glasses of wine, spread across several days rather than all in one go (NHS).

Alcohol and crime

Alcohol plays a role in **39%** of all violent crime in England and Wales. It's also a factor in anti-social behaviour, domestic violence, and drink-driving accidents (Alcohol change UK).

Alcohol and mental health

Alcohol is closely linked to mental health struggles. Regular or excessive drinking can increase the risk of depression and anxiety, making existing conditions worse. Around **22%** of people receiving treatment for mental health issues also have an alcohol dependency (Mental Health Foundation).

What are the short-term effects of drinking alcohol?

Drinking affects the body almost immediately. Some effects are subtle, while others can be more noticeable and dangerous.

- Impaired judgment and decision-making
- Lowered inhibitions, leading to risky behaviours
- Slurred speech and difficulty concentrating
- Loss of coordination and balance
- Drowsiness and fatigue
- Nausea and vomiting, especially after binge drinking
- Dehydration, leading to headaches and dizziness
- Hangovers the next day, including headaches, nausea, and tiredness

What are the long-term effects of drinking alcohol?

Regular, excessive drinking can take a serious toll on both physical and mental health.

Liver damage – Alcohol is toxic to the liver, and long-term use can lead to fatty liver disease, hepatitis, and cirrhosis, which can be life-threatening.

Heart problems – Heavy drinking is linked to high blood pressure, irregular heartbeats, and an increased risk of heart disease and stroke.

Mental health issues – Alcohol can contribute to or worsen depression, anxiety, and mood disorders. It can also affect memory and increase the risk of dementia over time.

Weakened immune system – Regular alcohol use makes the body more vulnerable to infections and slows down healing.

Increased cancer risk – Alcohol is linked to a higher risk of mouth, throat, breast, and liver cancer.

Dependence and addiction – Long-term drinking can lead to physical and psychological dependence, making it difficult to stop without help.

Alcohol and the younger generation

It's normal for teenagers and young adults to experiment, test boundaries and take some risks. Drinking alcohol and trying drugs is one of the ways in which some young people do this. It is common for teenagers to drink alcohol at some point, and some of the reasons why they might choose to drink might be:

- It makes them feel good in the moment
- It's a way of having fun and socialising
- They are curious and want to test boundaries or try new things
- They want to fit in with a social group or feel pressured to drink
- It makes them feel more confident
- They want to distract themselves from difficult thoughts or feelings

As a parent or carer, it's important to talk to your child or young person about drugs and alcohol. By doing this, you can help them to understand the risks and support them to make healthy choices.

Spotting alcohol issues in young people

Drinking alcohol at a young age can increase the risk of long-term health issues and addiction. If you're worried that a young person in your life might be developing a drinking problem, here are some key signs:

- **Changes in school performance** – Falling grades, missing classes, or losing interest in studies
- **New social circles** – Spending time with new friends who drink, or withdrawing from usual friendships
- **Secretive behaviour** – Lying about where they've been or what they've been doing
- **Physical changes** – Bloodshot eyes, tiredness, or weight changes
- **Unexplained need for money** – Asking for or stealing money for alcohol
- **Mood swings** – Increased aggression, sadness, or unpredictable behaviour

If you notice several of these signs, it's worth having an open and supportive conversation to understand what's going on.

When is someone drinking too much?

If you're worried that a young person in your life might be developing a drinking problem, here are some key signs:

- **They need more alcohol to feel its effects** – This is a sign of increasing tolerance, which can lead to dependence.
- **They struggle to stop or cut down** – Even when they try, they find it difficult to reduce their drinking.
- **They experience withdrawal symptoms** – Feeling shaky, anxious, or nauseous when not drinking.
- **Their drinking is causing problems** – Whether it's at work, in relationships, or with health, alcohol is having a noticeable impact.
- **They use alcohol to cope** – Drinking to deal with stress, sadness, or boredom can quickly become a dangerous habit.



If you or someone you know is struggling with alcohol, support is available. Alcohol misuse can have serious impacts on health, relationships, and work life. Recognising the signs and seeking help early can make a significant difference.

Speaking to a GP, occupational health team, or an alcohol support service can be the first step towards a healthier future. At Medigold Health, we are committed to providing comprehensive support and resources to help individuals overcome alcohol-related challenges.

If you want some advice from our team of experts, you can contact us here: **0330 390 3370**.