

# Alcohol, mental health and wellbeing

Drinking alcohol is linked to both anxiety and depression. A recent British survey found that people suffering from anxiety or depression were twice as likely to be heavy or problem drinkers. Alcohol has also been linked to self-harm, suicide and psychosis.

Apart from affecting your mental health, consuming alcohol also affects your memory and brain function. Soon after drinking alcohol, brain processes slow down. For example, the effect on men's driving skills is measurable after the consumption of three to four units. At this level of consumption, alcohol is in the bloodstream at around 50mg per 100ml. Women can reach this same concentration by drinking just two or three units.

People often feel rough after a session of heavy drinking, feeling that their memory and thinking is impaired. It's difficult to be sure whether this is a genuine effect; just part of the folklore about hangovers, or because there is still alcohol in the tissues the next day. Some people, even when they no longer have alcohol in the bloodstream, are probably slightly 'slowed' mentally the next day.

## FACTS and FIGURES

### Anxiety and depression

Self-harm and alcohol are often linked. In 2006, a survey was carried out among 3,004 patients presenting at Scottish accident and emergency departments as a result of self-harm.. It found that 62% of males and 50% of females reported consuming alcohol immediately before or while self-harming, and 27% of men and 19% of women cited alcohol as the reason for self-harming.

It has been estimated that alcohol plays a part in up to 65% of suicides in the UK.

Extreme levels of drinking (e.g. more than 30 units per day for several weeks) can occasionally cause 'psychosis', a severe mental illness where hallucinations and delusions of persecution develop. Psychotic symptoms can also occur when very heavy drinkers suddenly stop drinking and develop a condition known as 'delirium tremens'.

### Memory and brain

Drinking 8-10 units per day over extended time periods results in some mental inefficiency; at 11-14 units per day, deficits (reduced brain capacity) are present; at 18 or more units per day, harm **can be of the severity seen in someone diagnosed with alcoholism.**

The human brain is still in the process of development until the age of 18 or 19, and it may be more susceptible to damage than the adult brain. In adolescents who regularly drink alcohol, parts of the brain important in planning and emotional control have been found to be smaller than expected.

Over the age of 65, performance of mental tasks declines less slowly in light and moderate drinkers. However, light and moderate drinking (defined as an occasional 1-2 units) is often associated with other factors which reduce mental decline, such as physical and social activity, good diet, and better socio-economic standards.

At advanced age, in residential community homes, a 'social hour' with alcohol or a unit of alcohol at bedtime, can improve mental wellbeing. On the other hand, alcohol is also a cause of falls in the elderly because it affects balance.

## PROGRESSION

Heavy drinking can lead to work and family problems, which in turn can lead to isolation and depression. For heavy drinkers who drink daily, there can be withdrawal symptoms (nervousness, tremors, palpitations), which resemble anxiety and may even cause phobias, such as fear of going out.

Hospitals see some people who were once high performers mentally and intellectually, but who have severely damaged their brains due to drinking.

One very disabling type of brain damage due to heavy drinking (probably in combination with malnourishment) is when short-term memory fails. This means the individual may not be able to recall where he is, how he got there or what day it is.

## ADVICE and GETTING HELP

Light or moderate drinking does not harm emotional balance. But heavy drinkers who have run into emotional problems are wise to avoid alcohol completely, because previous patterns often recur.

People prescribed antidepressants, sedatives, analgesics or drugs for epilepsy should avoid alcohol.

**People who have damaged the brain should not drink at all.**

**Older people drinking very lightly don't need to stop on grounds of their age or because they fear it might harm their brain.**

Heavy drinking sessions should be avoided by everyone, at all ages. If you do drink heavily, try to have a balanced diet, and if you do **not**, take B vitamin supplements.

If you are concerned about any aspect of your own drinking, or your mental health, your GP will be able to help. You can also call **Drinkline** on **0800 917 8282**, a free confidential helpline (open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week) who can point you towards your local alcohol service. You can also call **Drinkline** if you're worried about somebody else's drinking.

It is important that if you are a heavy drinker and might suffer alcohol withdrawal symptoms, you should **never** stop drinking suddenly. Instead, cut down a little and get immediate medical advice.

### LINKS

#### The Mental Health Foundation

A leading UK charity that works to improve services for anyone affected by mental health problems, whatever their age and wherever they live.  
[www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

#### CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably)

Aimed at young men aged from 15 to 35. It offers help, information and advice via a phone and web service. Anyone, regardless of age, gender or geographic location can call the line: 0800 58 58 58. [www.thecalzone.net](http://www.thecalzone.net)

**Breathing Space** is a free and confidential Scottish phone line for any individual who is experiencing low mood or depression or who is unusually worried and in need of someone to talk to: 0800 83 85 87.

**Samaritans** provides confidential non-judgemental emotional support, 24 hours a day for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including those which could lead to suicide. You can ring the phone line on 08457 90 90 90 or email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org) (they try their hardest to get back to you within 24 hours).

#### Author: Dr Jonathan Chick

MA MBChB MPhil DSc FRCP(Edin) FRC Psych

Dr Jonathan Chick is Consultant Psychiatrist at Royal Edinburgh Hospital and a part-time senior lecturer in psychiatry at Edinburgh University.

#### References can be supplied on request

Drinkaware  
7-10 Chandos Street  
London  
W1G 9DQ  
0207 307 7450

The Drinkaware Trust  
Registered in England and Wales No. 4547974  
A company limited by guarantee  
Registered Charity No. 1094586