

DRINKAWARE

Alcohol and your mental health

Facts about alcohol's impact on mental health, and advice to develop healthy coping strategies without alcohol



Who we are

Drinkaware is the national charity working to prevent and reduce alcohol misuse in Ireland, governed by an independent board and regulated by the Charities Regulator.

We do this through our evidence-informed programmes at community level with the public and online, through post-primary school teachers, parents and in workplaces. The national research we commission encourages greater understanding of alcohol consumption and its impact on individuals, families and society as a whole. The health promotion resources we provide offer practical ways to drink less or cut out alcohol to protect health and wellbeing.

The WHO recommends a multi-faceted approach to reducing alcohol misuse and harm. Below is a brief overview of Drinkaware's contribution to this collective effort and achievement of our two ambitious goals, to delay the age of first drink and reduce the number of adults who drink above the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines.

What we do

Outreach & Engagement

Drinkaware designs and delivers ongoing media and digital campaigns and produces evidence-informed tools and resources for the general public. These health promotion resources and campaigns are also widely utilised by community, health, civil society organisations, youth and education organisations.

Research

Drinkaware conducts and commissions regular, robust national research studies to explore the attitudes, behaviours and drivers of alcohol consumption among adults in Ireland. We also carry out bi-annual research to assess parental attitudes towards underage drinking and their understanding of the risks associated with early alcohol use. Our research is rigorously analysed, used to inform our work and is shared with mission-aligned organisations.

Education

Drinkaware's public health remit includes tackling underage drinking. We do this by empowering teachers and parents to support their students and children to have a better awareness and understanding of the facts regarding alcohol. Our school-based work includes parent workshops and the evidence informed Alcohol Education Programme (AEP), which is aligned to the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Curriculum.

Why do we drink alcohol?

To understand the relationship between alcohol and mental health, we need to understand the many motivations for alcohol consumption.

The reasons why we drink will differ from person to person. Some reasons might be as a result of negative influences and early alcohol use. While for others it may be a consequence of a trauma in adult life.

Let's look at some of the reasons why people drink alcohol.



- » To relax
- » To feel brave
- » To celebrate life events
- » To drown our sorrows
- » To forget
- » To remember
- » To welcome people
- » To say goodbye to people
- » To get to know people
- » To numb ourselves
- » To feel grown-up
- » To feel young
- » To belong

...and because we have forgotten how to do anything without it.



Source: Mental Health Foundation (UK)¹.

Think about times when you drink alcohol.
Do any of these reasons sound familiar?

What is mental health?

Positive mental health contributes to your overall wellbeing and is experienced when you can realise your own abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and contribute to your community.² Many factors, including how much and how often we drink alcohol, can affect our mental health.

Alcohol's impact on mental health

The negative effect of alcohol on our mental health is significant. Alcohol can contribute to the development of mental health problems including depression and anxiety. It can also make existing problems worse. And you may experience memory issues or find it hard to concentrate.³

Alcohol is a depressant that disrupts how the brain functions. It affects our thoughts, feelings and actions. Alcohol affects the levels of chemicals in our brain including serotonin, which regulates happiness. This change to the brain processes causes the relaxed or happy feeling you may get after your first drink. This same change is also responsible for the feelings of anxiety, sadness or depression you may experience the next day.⁴

Regularly drinking more than the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines interferes with these chemicals in our brains that are needed for strong, balanced mental health.



16%
of Irish adults
say they suffer
from **anxiety**
or **depression**⁵



50%
of adults
in Ireland cite
'**cop**ing' as a reason
for drinking alcohol⁶



€8.2 billion
Mental health
problems **cost the**
Irish economy over
€8.2 billion annually⁷



74%
of all mental health
issues **first emerge**
between 15 and 25
years of age⁸

Five ways to wellbeing

Wellbeing is feeling good about yourself, the world around you and functioning well in everyday life, most of the time. Being resilient and coping with the normal stresses of life is also an important attribute of wellbeing.⁹

There are many things that can influence wellbeing, including alcohol use. Others include exercise, diet, a sense of belonging, relationships, career and finances.

Alcohol can have a negative impact on each of these areas of life and as a result, affect overall wellbeing.

The Five Ways to Wellbeing are a set of evidence-based actions we can practice each day to improve our mental health and wellbeing.

Connect

With the people around you. With family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. At home, work, school or in your local community. Think of these as the cornerstones of your life and invest time in developing them. Building these connections will support and enrich you every day.

Be active

Go for a walk or run. Step outside. Cycle. Play a game. Garden. Dance. Exercising makes you feel good. Most importantly, discover a physical activity you enjoy; one that suits your level of mobility and fitness.

Take notice

Be curious. Catch sight of the beautiful. Remark on the unusual. Notice the changing seasons. Savour the moment, whether you are on a train, eating lunch or talking to friends. Be aware of the world around you and what you are feeling. Reflecting on your experiences will help you appreciate what matters to you.

Keep learning

Try something new. Rediscover an old interest. Sign up for that course. Take on a different responsibility at work. Fix a bike. Learn to play an instrument or how to cook your favourite food. Set a challenge you will enjoy achieving. Learning new things will make you more confident, as well as being fun to do.

Give

Do something nice for a friend, or a stranger. Thank someone. Smile. Volunteer your time. Join a community group. Look out, as well as in. Seeing yourself, and your happiness, linked to the wider community can be incredibly rewarding and will create connections with the people around you.

Alcohol and Anxiety

Alcohol has an anxiolytic effect.¹¹ This means that it reduces feelings of anxiety. For example, having a drink may make some people feel more confident at a social occasion where they don't know anyone else. But these effects are temporary. And in reality, this can increase anxiety in the long-term.¹²

The morning after drinking alcohol, you may notice you're feeling down or anxious. Alcohol has an effect on some of the chemicals in the brain.¹³ These changes can make you feel good while you're drinking. However, once the effect has worn off, feelings of anxiety are common.¹⁴ In Ireland, this is colloquially known as "the fear".

Part of this is because while you may feel relaxed, happy or less anxious after the first drink, alcohol can also reduce inhibitions. This includes impaired judgement and decision-making and less awareness of danger.¹⁵ It's all part of the same process. And so, we may make poor decisions, take risks that we wouldn't normally even consider or put ourselves and others in danger.

How this affects your sleep

Anxiety often contributes to poor sleep. Alcohol can have a sedative effect¹⁶ but it also disrupts the sleep/wake cycle (our internal 24-hour clock). It also suppresses melatonin, which regulates the sleep cycle. The result is that sleep quality can be reduced. This is mainly due to the effects on Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep, which is acknowledged to be the 'restorative' component of sleep. And so, a lack of REM sleep can reduce concentration and focus the next day.

Anxiety is something everyone experiences from time to time. However, when anxious feelings persist for more than a couple of days and it affects other aspects of your life it can become a problem. Anxiety can affect mental and physical health such as an inability to sleep or concentrate, nervousness, headaches and constant worry.

Drinking to cope and conform

Some people who experience feelings of anxiety may use alcohol as a way to manage situations that trigger these feelings. Here are some of the reasons adults in Ireland report drinking to cope or conform.¹⁷

- 33% - To be liked
- 42% - To cheer you up when you are in a bad mood or stressed
- 41% - To fit in with a group you like

Building resilience

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity and rebound a stronger and more resourceful person.¹⁸ It is our capacity to cope with a challenging or stressful time and recover from difficulties faced in everyday life. How we are feeling at a particular time can affect how quickly we are able to adapt to setbacks we experience.

Resilience is a lifelong process

Resilience is nurtured in childhood and can be developed further throughout life. Each person faces life's ups and downs in different ways. While some people may appear more resilient than others, resilience is a skill we can all strengthen at every stage of life.¹⁹ Try to practice being resilient at every opportunity.

Tips for building resilience

Have a positive outlook

Think about all the positive things in your life – big and small. Be hopeful about the future and expect that good things will happen in your life. If you experience fear or doubt, try to reset and visualise your goals.

Stay connected and share

Maintain good relationships with your family and friends. Ask for and accept help from support networks when you need it. Sharing a setback you are facing with someone you trust is a great way to hear another point of view. And you may learn that others have experienced the same thing and come through it.

Assess how you adapt to difficulties

Look at how you have typically responded to challenges in daily life. Were you calm or overwhelmed? How did you feel when you took actions to solve the problem? Will you use the same skills to work through stressful situations in the future? Recognise your strengths and remind yourself of times when you have successfully adapted to difficulties.

Focus on things you can change

Acknowledge that there are some things you cannot change. Try to accept this and use your energy focusing on all the things you can change. Writing down a plan of actions you can take towards positive change can help.

Read tips for healthy coping strategies on page 10

Alcohol and Depression

Alcohol is a depressant. This means that alcohol can cause depression or make it worse.²⁰ If you drink alcohol when you are experiencing symptoms of depression, things may seem better for a short time. But once these temporary effects of the alcohol wear off, you may feel even worse than before. And the cause of the depression has not gone away.²¹

Mental health problems like depression can become harder to manage if you use alcohol as a way of dealing with them. Attempts to cope with feelings and symptoms of depression may lead some people to drink more alcohol and more often. This is also known as self-medicating.



The more you turn to alcohol as a way to cope, the less you will be able to cope without it. This can become a cycle and can lead to alcohol dependence.²²

The effect of binge drinking

The link between alcohol and depression is intensified by binge drinking²³ (six or more standard drinks in one sitting). This is because the amount of alcohol you drink has a more harmful impact than how often you drink.

Feeling

sad, anxious, guilty

Life

loss of interest in living, thinking about death, suicidal thoughts

Aches

physical aches and pains with no physical basis

Value

low self esteem

Drinking to cope with depression

Drinking alcohol to improve your mood or cope with stress is an unhealthy coping strategy. And it means that you are missing out on developing healthy coping skills. This can lead to more serious problems in the future.

However, in Ireland there is emerging evidence that drinking to cope is relatively common. Here are some of the reasons cited by Irish adults:²⁴

34% – To forget about your problems

29% - Because it helps when you feel depressed or anxious

Evidence shows that people who drink heavily are more prone to depression.²⁵ Alcohol affects the chemistry of the brain. For example, by lowering the levels of serotonin, which regulates happiness.²⁶ This can lead to depressive symptoms.²⁷

Read about some healthier coping strategies that don't involve alcohol on page 10/11

If you experience **five or more of these symptoms**, lasting for a period of **two weeks or more**, please **speak to your GP or mental health professional**.

Energy

low energy, feeling tired or fatigued

Sleeping

under or over-sleeping, any change to normal sleep pattern

Thinking

poor concentration, thoughts slowed down

Interest

loss of interest in hobbies, family or social life

Symptoms of depression



Source: Aware

Healthier ways to cope

Instead of turning to alcohol to help you relax or improve your mood, why not try some of these suggestions?



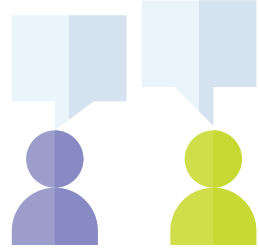
Limit or cut out alcohol

If you catch yourself reaching for a glass of wine or bottle of beer to reduce stress, make a change. Have plenty of non-alcoholic alternatives in the house and put them within easy reach. Store alcohol out of sight. It might be helpful to remove alcohol from your shopping list. If it's not in the house, you can't drink it. Create a list of activities to do instead: listen to a podcast, read a book or start a DIY project you've been putting off.



Keep an active routine

We all need fresh air and exercise every day. Here in Ireland, we are lucky to have stunning landscapes and green spaces on our doorstep so there are lots of ways to get active. Maintaining a regular routine of walking, cycling or running can benefit both your mental and physical wellbeing. Exploring your local area is a great place to start. If you can't get outside every day, join an online yoga or workout session.



Talk to family and friends

Talking about your problems or how you are feeling with someone you trust is one of the best things you can do. Keeping in touch can have a positive impact on our mood and ability to deal with problems. This is also a good way to reconnect with people you have lost touch with over the years or haven't spoken to in a while. Make a list and plan to call, text or write to a one every week.



Remember you're not alone:

If you need to talk to someone about how you are feeling, you can call the YourMentalHealth Information Line on **1800 111 888** to find out about the mental health supports and services available to you.



Explore relaxation techniques

Meditating, practising mindfulness or yoga for even just a few minutes can help you to relax and to feel more positive when feeling overwhelmed. There are a lot of smartphone apps available that can open up a new world of healthy relaxation routines. Why not ask a friend if they have a recommendation?



Sleep and rest well

Aim to get 7-9 hours of sleep every night, even longer for children. Alcohol, even just a few drinks, can affect how well you sleep. And this can lead to a bad night's rest. Any anxiety you are experiencing may already be affecting your sleep, and alcohol will impact this further. A good night's sleep can help to increase your concentration and productivity. Plus, you'll have more energy to spend doing the things that make you happy.



Take up a new hobby

Cooking or baking is something you can take up yourself or involve the whole family. A balanced nutritious diet is just as important for mental health as it is for physical health. Look outside, maybe your garden needs some sprucing up. Gardening can have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing.

What is a standard drink?

A standard drink is a measure of alcohol. In Ireland, one standard drink contains 10 grams of pure alcohol. Common examples are opposite.



Half pint of lager, beer or stout (4.5%, 284ml)



Small glass of wine (12.5%, 100ml)



Pub measure of spirits (40%, 35.5ml)

What are the low-risk weekly guidelines?

Low-risk drinking reduces your risk of alcohol-related harm. Getting to know the guidelines can help you to know how much you're drinking in the week. Remember, these are guidelines - not a target.



Less than **11** standard drinks (110g alcohol) spread out over the week



Less than **17** standard drinks (170g alcohol) spread out over the week

Can I drink these in one sitting?

Space out any drinking over the week to give your body a break and time to recover. Having at least two alcohol-free days in the week (more is even better) is beneficial for your physical and mental wellbeing. This can also help to break the cycle of a habit that may be forming.

What is binge drinking?

Binge drinking (or heavy episodic drinking) is consuming 6 or more standard drinks in one sitting, usually in a short space of time.

Our liver can process one standard drink per hour. When you binge, you're drinking faster than your liver can handle. This means that the liver's ability to process alcohol AND complete all the other essential functions it performs is affected.

There is no safe level of alcohol consumption overall but regular binge drinking or drinking more than the low-risk guidelines will increase risks to your health, wellbeing and safety.



4 Glasses of Wine (12.5%, 150ml)



3 Pints of Lager (4.5%, 568ml)



5 Bottles of Cider (4.5%, 330ml)

Wellness Tracker

Each of the habits below can have a positive and a negative impact on your mental health. Using the scale, what does your day look like? See if you can allocate more time to this things that create strong, balanced mental health.

- 1 None
 2 Very little
 3 Some
 4 Quite a bit
 5 A lot

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
Hours of sleep							
Exercise							
Junk food							
Fizzy drinks							
Alcohol							
Screen time							
Time spent alone							
Time spent in company							

Today I am grateful for:							
The moods I experienced:							

Need support?

Drinkaware's support hub has details on national and local support services.

Visit: www.drinkaware.ie/support-services



HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline

This is a free and confidential, active listening helpline and email support service offering non-directive support, information, guidance and referral to anyone with a question or concern related to substance use.

Call: **1800 459 459** or Email: helpline@hse.ie

50808

This is a free 24/7 text service, providing everything from a calming chat to immediate support for people going through a mental health or emotional crisis - big or small.

Text **HELLO** to **50808**

Pieta House Helpline

Pieta House provides specialised national services and support for people in suicidal distress or engaging in self-harm. The Pieta House suicide helpline is open 24 hours a day.

Text **HELP** to **51444** or Call **1800 247 247**

If your life is at imminent risk, call **999** for emergency help.



Before you stop drinking, talk to your GP if you think that you will find it hard to stop drinking or if you are worried that you may be at risk of alcohol dependence.

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