



UNDERSTANDING ALCOHOL ADDICTION

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Short guides to understanding addiction and mental health

UNDERSTANDING ALCOHOL ADDICTION

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Written by Dr Hannah Farnsworth

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WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE ENJOY ALCOHOL?

It is common to start to enjoy alcohol in your teens or early twenties. There are many reasons that individuals might choose to drink alcohol including:

- To look cool in front of friends
- To join in with what friends are doing
- Feeling pressurised by friends to drink alcohol
- To feel more sociable
- To feel a buzz
- To feel more confident
- Enjoying the taste of alcohol.

Around two-thirds of 15 year olds drink alcohol a few times a year, with around 14% drinking alcohol once a week.

WHAT IS ALCOHOL ADDICTION?

Drinking alcohol occasionally, and in small amounts, is common amongst teenagers.

Alcohol addiction is sometimes known as alcohol dependence or alcoholism. These terms describe the very strong desire to drink alcohol. This desire is often so strong that it cannot be resisted, and people who are dependent on alcohol may feel that they are no longer in control of when and how much they drink. They may experience feelings of 'needing' to drink, even though they know that alcohol may be harming their health.

If alcohol addiction is present, alcohol will feel like the most important thing in someone's life. They may feel that they have to find ways to drink no matter what the cost. Alcohol may seem more important than seeing friends, carrying on with hobbies, or going to school or work.

You do not need to be consuming large amounts of alcohol to develop dependence. Simply drinking regularly could be a sign of dependency.

People who have alcohol dependence may find it very difficult to stop drinking. This is because those who have an addiction may experience withdrawal when they try to cut out alcohol. The symptoms of withdrawal can feel very unpleasant, including sweating, sickness, feeling anxious and restless, or in extreme cases, experiencing hallucinations or seizures (fits).

THE SYMPTOMS OF ALCOHOL ADDICTION

Alcohol addiction can occur slowly, before gradually increasing in intensity. The following symptoms could be a sign that someone is becoming dependent on alcohol:

- Developing 'tolerance' – people who drink alcohol regularly may find that they develop a tolerance to it. This means they will need to drink more alcohol to get the desired buzz or effect, so over time the amount of alcohol someone drinks can significantly increase.
- Feeling that it is impossible to relax or enjoy a situation unless you can have a drink
- Spending a lot of your time thinking about when you can next have a drink
- Choosing to do things that will allow you to get hold of alcohol
- Feeling that you 'need' to have a drink or can't cope without drinking
- Parents, friends and others telling you that they are worried about how much you are drinking, or commenting on your drinking
- Finding that you get in trouble with your parents, teachers, or Gardaí as a result of alcohol
- Wondering whether drinking alcohol is starting to cause issues for you at school, work, home, or regarding your physical or mental health.



WHAT CAUSES ALCOHOL ADDICTION?

Like other forms of addiction, alcohol affects the reward centres of the brain. These centres affect how good we feel in ourselves. Drinking alcohol provides pleasurable feelings of happiness, excitability, or relaxation. As alcohol consumption increases, we get used to having these feelings. Therefore, if you do not have a drink, you experience unpleasant withdrawal sensations because the reward centres are no longer being stimulated by alcohol. This drives you to have another drink, because you know it will make you feel better.

Alcohol addiction may form more easily than other forms of addiction. This is, in part, due to alcohol being legal and customary in many social situations. Trying alcohol is therefore more normal and acceptable than other addictive substances such as drugs.



There are many factors that can influence the risk that someone will become addicted to alcohol including:

- Family attitudes towards alcohol
- Whether drinking occurs socially amongst your friends
- How easy it is for you to get hold of alcohol
- Whether you can afford to buy alcohol
- Being affected by a stressful event such as a bereavement, family break up, or relationship breakdown.

HOW DO I RECOGNISE ALCOHOL ADDICTION?

If you think you are becoming dependent on alcohol, you may have noticed:



- You think about alcohol all the time, or are preoccupied with when you can have your next drink
- You spend more and more time drinking alcohol
- You try to make plans that will involve drinking alcohol
- When you can't have a drink, you feel grumpy, frustrated, irritable, or crave your next drink, but these feelings may settle once you have had a drink
- You feel snappy or irritable whenever anyone comments on your drinking
- It becomes harder to make decisions because you are so focused on alcohol
- Friendships or relationships start to break down
- Other things in life feel less important than they used to, such as schoolwork, hobbies or friendships
- You have increased the amount you spend on purchasing alcohol, or start to consider taking your parents' alcohol or shop-lifting
- Your mood starts to become low or depressed, or you feel anxious, stressed or angry.

It can be very hard to recognise your own addiction, and many people find it difficult to admit to themselves that they may be struggling with alcohol. You may find it helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- Has alcohol taken over from other areas of your life, such as friendships, your social life, or your schoolwork?

- Do you feel like you have to drink, rather than wanting to drink for enjoyment?
- Does alcohol help you to cope with a different problem, such as feeling lonely, nervous or depressed?
- Has anyone close to you annoyed you by saying that they think you are drinking too much?
- Do you think that you should cut down on alcohol?
- Do you feel bad or guilty about your drinking?
- Do you ever need to have a drink in the morning to get rid of a hangover (sometimes known as an 'eye opener' or 'hair of the dog').

If you answer yes to any of these questions, you should seek support and advice from a parent, teacher or healthcare professional.

HOW CAN I AVOID BECOMING ADDICTED TO ALCOHOL?

Lots of teenagers start experimenting with alcohol, and there are steps you can take to make sure that you enjoy it without becoming dependent on it. The following ideas may be helpful.

Take regular breaks from alcohol

Taking regular breaks from alcohol is one of the best ways to avoid becoming dependent on it. Set periods of time when you are not going to drink alcohol, and stick to it. This will help to avoid tolerance and dependence from occurring, and also breaks the cycle of feeling like you 'need' alcohol to have a good time.

Use an app to track your alcohol use

It can be easy to lose track of how much you are drinking. It is therefore wise to download an app that will help you keep a record of how much you drink each week, compared to the recommended limits. Some apps will also help you to learn about your triggers or prompts for drinking, so you can start to avoid these situations.

Cut back on alcohol

If you think you are drinking too much, or tracking your alcohol use with an app shows you that you are drinking more than the recommended safe level of alcohol, you will need to take steps to cut back. Cutting back now will help to avoid addiction occurring in future. It may take several weeks to reduce your alcohol use, but it is worth persevering.

Replace alcohol

It's not just the drug effect of alcohol that makes it addictive. Many people enjoy the feeling of holding a glass in their hand, or drinking when they are with friends. You may find you can get this same buzz from choosing a non-alcoholic alternative, such as an alcohol-free beer or a mocktail.

Create a strict budget

If you are buying your own alcohol, create a budget and don't buy any more alcohol once this money has gone. If others offer to pay for you, politely decline. If they insist, you could always ask for a soft drink instead.

Don't forget your activities

Drinking alcohol can start to take over your life if you become dependent. Try not to let it take you away from the activities you used to enjoy, such as music, sports or socialising with friends. Ensuring that you keep doing the things you love will help to prevent alcohol feeling more important.



Listen to others

If family, friends, teachers or other adults raise concerns about your drinking, try to listen to them and be open to considering what they say. If others are worried, they may be able to see patterns or changes that you cannot easily see in yourself. Consider why they may be worried, and think carefully about how much you are drinking, how often, and whether you have any signs of dependence, to see if they might be right.

HOW CAN I COPE WITH AN ALCOHOL ADDICTION?



If you think you are addicted to alcohol, there are steps you can take to manage the addiction.

Speak to your doctor

If you think you might be addicted to alcohol, **you will need to speak to your doctor before you try to cut down.** This is because cutting down on alcohol when you are dependent on it can be dangerous for your health. Your doctor will talk to you about your drinking patterns and any symptoms that you might be experiencing, before recommending ways you can cut down on drinking, or advising that you need a further health assessment to cut down on alcohol safely.

Once you have stopped drinking alcohol with the help of a medical professional, there are ways that you can avoid drinking alcohol again in future.

The following tips are only to be considered once you have received medical advice regarding alcohol dependence.

Aim for abstinence

Like other forms of addiction, it is often recommended that to avoid becoming addicted to alcohol again in future, you should completely abstain from drinking. You will need to think about how to avoid situations in which you might be tempted to have a drink. Having one drink will often lead to another, especially if you have previously had an addiction. Avoiding alcohol may be easier if you:



- Do not visit pubs, instead arrange to meet friends in a cafe
- Avoid restaurants at times when many people may also be drinking alcohol
- Track your progress regarding alcohol free days using an app
- Make alternative plans – if you would usually drink at the weekend with friends, plan to do something different such as going for a walk, going to the cinema or meeting in town to go shopping
- Throw yourself into a new hobby, such as a sports club, theatre or musical company, or start an online course
- Identify any triggers for drinking, and try to avoid these where possible
- Join a support group for people who have struggled with alcohol addiction.

Speak to family or friends

Being open with family and friends, or other people you feel close to, can help you to abstain from drinking. If others are aware of how you feel, they can be proactive in including you in new activities, or inviting you to social events that do not involve alcohol. This will make it easier to resist any urges to have a drink of alcohol.

Join a support group

Consider joining a support group, such as Alcoholics Anonymous Ireland to receive support from people who understand what you are going through.

I HAVE A FRIEND WHO MIGHT HAVE AN ALCOHOL ADDICTION. WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP THEM?

If you think your friend might have an alcohol addiction, they may be very defensive if you try to talk to them about it. Try not to take it personally if your friend rejects your offers of help, or denies that there is a problem.

You are not responsible for your friend, however, you may feel able to offer emotional and practical support. The following may be helpful to start a conversation between you and your friend about a possible dependence on alcohol:

- You can start by saying that you feel worried by the amount of time they seem to spend drinking alcohol, or by how much alcohol they consume overall
- Ask your friend if they are worried about the way they drink alcohol
- Suggest that they seek help from family members, teachers, a doctor or counsellor, or another healthcare professional
- Talk to your friend about whether they would like to cut down or stop drinking alcohol
- Suggest alternative activities you could do together that don't involve alcohol, such as sports, going to the cinema, or meeting at a café.

If you remain worried about your friend, you must ask for help from an adult, such as a teacher, your parents, or your friend's parents.



I THINK MY CHILD MIGHT HAVE AN ALCOHOL ADDICTION, WHAT ARE THE SIGNS?

If you are worried that your child might be drinking heavily or have become reliant on alcohol, you may have noticed some of the following signs:



- Becoming withdrawn at home, or spending more time than usual by themselves
- Spending a lot of time out of the house, and returning smelling of alcohol or visibly intoxicated
- Drinking frequently, whether overtly or in a secretive manner
- Regularly being hungover or saying they feel ill
- Regularly vomiting after drinking
- No longer going to clubs, or giving up hobbies they used to enjoy
- A noticeable drop in school performance or academic achievement
- More irritable, frustrated or aggressive than usual
- Alcohol missing at home
- Money missing from your purse or wallet, or regularly asking you for money
- Becoming emotional, aggressive or defensive when you suggest they may need to cut down or stop drinking
- Symptoms that suggest they may be experiencing alcohol withdrawal, such as tremors or shakes, seeming anxious, saying that they feel sick, or appearing sweaty.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF MY CHILD HAS AN ALCOHOL ADDICTION?

Alcohol addiction must be taken seriously. Your child is likely to be resistant to stopping drinking, as to them alcohol will feel like something that they 'need' to cope with everyday life. However, you can start a gentle conversation with them about how they feel about alcohol, why they might find it difficult to stop, and why it is important to accept treatment for addiction.



If possible, accompany your child to see their doctor. A doctor can recommend a treatment plan, or plan to cut down, as well as offering any medical assistance that may be required. If your child resists, you may also need to take advice on getting counselling or specialist addiction support for your child.

You may also find it helpful to talk to your child's teachers or another professional at their school, as well as any sports' coaches or youth workers who already work with your child. Mental health and addiction charities may also be able to offer valuable advice.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol can increase the likelihood of physical and mental illness. However, like all addictions, alcohol addiction can be difficult to overcome. The first step is to be honest with yourself and recognise that you might have developed a dependence on alcohol. Specialist advice should be taken from your doctor to help you cut down your alcohol intake safely. If you feel able to, be honest with your family or friends who may be able to offer support in helping you manage your addiction.

YSPI Crisis Information:

[ineedhelp.ie](https://www.ineedhelp.ie)

Alcoholics Anonymous Ireland:

[alcoholicsanonymous.ie](https://www.alcoholicsanonymous.ie)

SASSY: Substance Abuse Service Specific to Youth:

SASSY@hse.ie

YODA: Youth Drug and Alcohol Service Helpline:

01 921 4978

Al-Anon Helpline:

01 873 2699

HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline:

1800 459 459



HELP AND ASSISTANCE

If you are concerned about yourself, friends or family you should contact your GP or Out of Hours Service immediately.

You can also get immediate support and information 24/7 by

FREETEXT HELP TO 50015

Texting 50015 is free of charge from any network and you can text this number even if you have no credit. This service is fully confidential and YSPI has no information on mobile numbers that use the FreeText service



For information on:

- Emergency Contacts
- National Helplines
- Local Support Groups
- Directions to your nearest GP or out of hours clinic
- Directions to your nearest safe place or refuge

 **WWW.INNEEDHELP.IE**

Always call 999 if someone is seriously ill or injured, and their life is at risk.

Gardaí / Ambulance / Fire call 999 or 112

ABOUT YOUTH SUICIDE PREVENTION IRELAND

Youth Suicide Prevention Ireland was founded in 2007 as there were no national charities focusing specifically on the problems and issues of youth suicide and self-harm in Ireland. We now provide a range of services aimed at mental health awareness and suicide prevention amongst teenagers.



Our main programme is **“Let’s Talk About Mental Health”** (www.letstalk.ie). This is a programme for students, teachers, parents and those who work with young people in schools, colleges, GAA clubs and youth organisations around Ireland.

Let’s Talk About Mental Health is a comprehensive mental health awareness and suicide prevention programme for ages 16+. As part of the programme we also provide a video workshop presented by John Sharpson that any organisation can book through our website at www.letstalk.ie/video.php.

We provide a wide range of free information including our “Let’s Talk About Mental Health” magazine delivered to schools and organisations as well as the “Coping With” series of mental health guides.

We also operate a 24/7 FreeText Crisis Information Service and fund a Youth Crisis Counselling Service at www.youthcrisiscounselling.ie.

Full details are available at www.yspi.ie



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2. Understanding Drug Addiction
3. Understanding Gaming Addiction
4. Understanding Gambling Addiction
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6. Understanding Sex Addiction
7. Understanding Consent

Youth Suicide Prevention Ireland

Registered Charity 20070670

83A New Street, Killarney, County Kerry V93 FR59

☎ 1800 828 888 ✉ admin@yspi.ie

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