

SELF HELP SHEET

Alcohol and College Life

Alcohol consumption in Ireland is legal and culturally normative. It is accepted that there are many advantages associated with moderate consumption. However, alcohol consumption does contribute to an array of personal and social difficulties both in the short and long term.

So, what is the problem?

The long-term health risks of regular consumption of alcohol are not the main issues facing students. The pattern of drinking by students who do choose to drink (male and female) is usually that of substantial intake during a single episode, interspersed with periods of low or no intake. This is known as “binge drinking”. Binge drinking carries with it particularly high risks of behavioural and health consequences because of the high levels of intoxication reached. Some of the consequences of binge drinking are:

- Not attending lectures and falling behind in your work, maybe even exam failure.
- Unruly behaviour on campus, in halls of residence or at sporting facilities causing offence, fear or creating actual physical risk to yourself and other members of the College.
- Legal and financial implications of drink driving and other alcohol related (e.g. public order, violence and property damage) convictions.
- Unprotected sexual activity potentially leading to unplanned pregnancy and/or risk of infection with sexually transmitted diseases.
- Serious injuries to self or others directly related to “accidents” caused by intoxication.
- Possible increases in a sense of isolation and the intensification of feelings of depression.
- Serious mood disorders to which alcohol is a major contributing factor.

The more often binge drinking occurs and the more drunk a person becomes, the more likely they are to get into trouble.

When does drinking become a problem for me?

If you experience any of the consequences listed above then you need to introduce greater control over your drinking. However, because we are not always aware of our behaviour when intoxicated we may need to get some feedback about our behaviour from trusted friends. Secondly, high levels of intoxication can cause memory loss called “blackouts”. Blackouts can cause people a great deal of anxiety particularly if there is the possibility that unprotected sexual activity has taken place. Blackouts also mean that you may

not remember if you have experienced any of the other negative consequences of binge drinking.

How much is too much?

The legal driving limit in Ireland is currently 80 milligrams of alcohol per 100 millilitres of blood. The same amount of alcohol consumed by different people will result in different blood alcohol levels because of gender differences, differences in weight and individual differences in body composition. The legal issue is not how much or how little you have to drink but your measured blood alcohol level.

The risks of the short-term negative consequences of alcohol consumption listed above increase rapidly over 80 mg of alcohol per 100 millilitres of blood. Long-term health risks occur at lower regular consumption levels than this.

Alcohol in all alcoholic drinks is the same. We compare alcohol content across drinks by using the term “units” of alcohol. About half a pint of beer, a small glass of wine and a single measure of spirits all contain about 1 unit of alcohol. If you are an average weight male, about 6 units (three pints) in one hour would probably put you over the legal driving limit. If you are an average weight female the figures are about half that! Because the same amount of alcohol consumed by different people will result in different blood alcohol levels, counting units and trying to estimate your level of blood alcohol is unreliable.

Alcohol is eliminated by the human system at about 1 unit per hour. Drinking coffee or large quantities of non-alcoholic fluids cannot speed up the process. Only time can do this. After a heavy night’s drinking it is possible to still be over the legal limit for driving in the morning.

You can reduce the risks of alcohol related consequences by:

- Planning to drink less.
 - Make a decision about how much you will drink and stick to it
 - Record how much you drink each time you go out. Work out how much this costs and think about what else you could do with the money.
 - Take a limited amount of money with you and when it runs out, stop.
 - Make a list of the positives and negatives of your drinking. Do the negatives outweigh the positives?
- Plan your social life so that you are at your physical and mental best prior to assessments and examinations. Limit the times you go out so that regular study and revision gets done.
- Avoid risk-taking behaviour and dangerous situations (diving, swimming, provoking fights, etc) when intoxicated.
- Drink lower alcohol options. Stout has a higher alcohol content than most beers.
- Drink a non-alcoholic option between or instead of alcoholic drinks.

- Eat some food or have a meal while you are drinking.
- Do not drive if you have been drinking. Leave the car where it is, get a taxi home and pick the car up next day.
- If you are going out in a car, have a designated driver. He or she undertakes not to drink.
- Use public transport including taxis.
- Drink in places where you know you will be safe and stay with people you trust.
- Plan how you are going to get home. Have agreed back-up systems like calling a friend (or parents) to pick you up if you find yourself in trouble.
- Agree to tell each other when things are getting out of hand.
- Do not let your friends get themselves into trouble. Make prior agreements about how you are going to get each other out of risky situations.

If you need help with the consequences of binge drinking or in controlling your alcohol consumption, contact the Student Counselling Service.

Further reading

Edwards, G. *Alcohol. The Ambiguous Molecule*. Penguin Books, 2000

Van Wormer, K. and Davis, D. *Addiction Treatment. A Strengths Perspective*.

Thompson, Brooks/Cole. Pacific Grove, CA. 2003