



Alcohol



Pure alcohol, called ethanol, is contained in all alcoholic drinks to some degree, which means that the strength, colour and taste of your favourites tipple, depends directly on how much ethanol is used and what other ingredients have been used to create it. The strength of an alcoholic drink is shown on the label as a percentage of volume, the higher the volume the stronger the drink. For example, a tin of lager could be 7% volume, while vodka could be 50% volume, or proof. Pure alcohol is poisonous.

Alcohol is absorbed into your bloodstream within a few minutes of being drunk and is carried to all parts of the body including the brain. The amount of alcohol in your body, known as your blood alcohol concentration (BAC), depends on many factors including how much you have drunk, whether you have eaten, and what you have been drinking. A full stomach sometimes delays the time for all the alcohol to be absorbed, so drinking with a meal, or afterwards, can result in a lower peak BAC.

What are the effects?

In small amounts, alcohol can help people relax, lose their inhibitions and become more talkative, because the alcohol is absorbed into your blood stream within minutes of being drunk. Large amounts of alcohol amplify these positive effects, and in some cases the individual can become over-bearing, aggressive, loud and sometimes violent. Stronger drinks like spirits, and fizzy drinks like champagne, sparkling cider, or alcopops are absorbed more quickly into the bloodstream, and subsequently increase drunken symptoms.

Your liver is responsible for removing alcohol from your body, and it takes about an hour to remove just one unit of alcohol. One unit of alcohol is the equivalent to a glass of wine, half a pint of beer or a single measure of spirits. The smaller your build and the lighter your weight, the same number of drinks can lead to more alcohol per pound (or kilogram) than a larger person, and therefore a higher BAC.

There are some health benefits from drinking alcohol, as doctors say that drinking alcohol in moderation can help prevent coronary heart disease; although naturally taking regular exercise and eating a healthy diet can also make a difference. The current recommended limit on alcohol intake is currently 2-3 units per day for women and 3-4 units per day for men.

What are the risks?

Alcohol is a drug that affects the parts of the brain devoted to making judgements and physical co-ordination; it is also a depressant. The more you drink, the greater the effect on your body, so if you drink heavily, you run the risk of falling into unconsciousness, which can have dangerous ramifications to your physical and mental being. For example, if you vomit while unconscious, or in a deep sleep following a heavy drinking session, you could choke.

Drinking too much can also lead to alcohol poisoning, which can be fatal, and according to the National Drugs Helpline, over 1,000 people under the age of 15 are admitted to hospital each year with alcoholic poisoning and all require emergency treatment.

Binge drinking, which is classified as drinking more than six units in six hours, can cause your blood pressure to rise, which, according to the NHS, can increase your risk of suffering a stroke. Current medical recommendations suggest that alcohol intake is moderated.

Some medications can also clash badly with alcohol, so you should always check with either your doctor or pharmacist before starting to drink if you are taking any form of medication.

What does the law say?

Under current UK law, it is illegal for anyone under the age of 18 to buy alcohol, whether in a supermarket, a pub or an off-licence. It is also illegal to supply someone under the age of 18 with alcohol.

Anyone under the age of 14 is not allowed into the bar of a pub unless that establishment has a 'children's certificate'.

However, 16 and 17 year old children are allowed to buy beer or cider as an accompaniment to a meal, but only in an area set aside for meals.

The police have the power to confiscate alcohol from anyone they know to be, or reasonably believe to be under the age of 18.

Drinking and driving is also a serious offence, and causing death by careless driving whilst under the influence of drink or drugs means a maximum ten years imprisonment and at least two years disqualification from driving. Driving or attempting to drive whilst above the legal limit or whilst unfit through drink or drugs means six months imprisonment plus a fine of £5,000 and at least one year's disqualification.

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