

Binge Drinking

Originally the term 'binge' was used in its clinical sense to refer to a periodic bout of continual drinking, over a period of days, by someone who was alcohol dependant, and ending only when the drinker was physically unable to continue.

More recently the term 'binge drinking' has been taken to mean a high intake of alcohol in a single drinking occasion.

Binge drinking is often defined by the number of drinks or units of alcohol consumed in a single drinking session. There is no internationally agreed definition, but in the UK, drinking surveys normally define binge drinkers as men consuming at least 8, and women at least 6 standard units of alcohol in a single day.

Getting worried yet...?

One unit could be any of the following:

- ½ pint beer, lager or cider (4-5% strength)
- ¼ pint beer, lager or cider (>6% strength)
- 125ml glass wine (10-13% strength)
- 25ml shot spirits (40% strength)
- 45-60ml glass port or sherry (18-21% strength)

The term binge drinking is certainly not new, nor exclusively a British phenomenon. Heavy sessional intake and drinking to get drunk have been an integral part of British drinking culture as far back as the Vikings.

Binge drinking is most prevalent in young people aged 16-24 years, but by no means restricted to them, and continues on a diminishing scale though adult life. People who binge drink in their early 20s are more likely to continue this behaviour into their 30s and 40s.

We know that drinking too much alcohol is not good for our health, but what it is about binge drinking that makes it that much worse?

Brain damage – in large doses, alcohol is neurotoxic and sustained high consumption can irreversibly destroy brain cells – adolescent brains are particularly susceptible to its effects.

Alcohol poisoning – results in muscular in-coordination, blurred or double vision, hypothermia and occasionally hypoglycaemia (low blood sugar) which may result in coma. Again this occurs more commonly in adolescents. Death may occur from failure of the heart or lungs to function properly or as a result of suffocating on vomit.

Cardiovascular system – increase or surge in blood pressure and a ten-fold increased risk of suffering a stroke. One-quarter of sudden cardiac deaths in young men are due to alcohol intoxication.

Cancer – having 4 or more drinks per night increases a woman's chance of getting breast cancer by 40%. The risk of developing oral cancer is also increased by excessive drinking.

Accidents, violence and criminal behaviour – between 20 and 40% of people attending A&E for treatment are intoxicated, many having had an accident. Prevalence of violence and criminal behaviour is substantially higher among binge drinkers than among non-binge drinkers.

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Psychological problems – Binge drinking causes more anxiety and neurosis than the same amount of alcohol consumed over a longer period. Binge drinking and other substance abuse increases the likelihood of other psychological problems in later life.

Unwanted / unsafe sexual activity - After binge drinking, one in seven 16 – 24 year olds have had unprotected sex, 1 in 5 had sex they later regretted and 1 in 10 could not remember whether or not they had sex the night before.

Other drug use – young binge drinkers are substantially more likely than non-binge drinkers to use illegal drugs.