

A photograph of a person drinking from a can at a party, with a bright light flare in the foreground. The image has a yellowish-green tint.

THE TRUTH ABOUT  
**ALCOHOL**

[drugfreeworld.org](http://drugfreeworld.org)

# WHY THIS BOOKLET WAS PRODUCED

There is a lot of talk about drugs in the world—on the streets, at school, on the Internet and TV. Some of it is true, some not.

Much of what you hear about drugs actually comes from those selling them. Reformed drug dealers have confessed they would have said anything to get others to buy drugs.

But what about alcohol? Is it really a drug? After all, it is legal, it is a part of social life and is even recommended by some doctors as healthy in small quantities.

In surveys we conducted, alcohol came up at the top of the list of substances youth said they are the most likely to use and they consider as a problem. Because it takes so many young lives (more than all other drugs combined), it is the substance parents are the most worried about.

You need facts to avoid becoming one of the many victims of alcohol and to help your friends stay safe. That is why we have prepared this booklet—for you.

Your feedback is important to us, so we look forward to hearing from you. You can visit us on the web at **[drugfreeworld.org](http://drugfreeworld.org)** and e-mail us at **[info@drugfreeworld.org](mailto:info@drugfreeworld.org)**.

# What is alcohol?

**A**lcohol is a drug.

It is classed as a depressant, meaning that it slows down vital functions—resulting in slurred speech, unsteady movement, disturbed perceptions and an inability to react quickly.

As for how it affects the mind, it is best understood as a drug that reduces a person's ability to think rationally and distorts his or her judgment.

Although classified as a depressant, the amount of alcohol consumed determines the type of effect. Most people drink for the *stimulant* effect, such as a beer or glass of wine taken to “loosen up.” But if a person consumes more than the body can handle, they then experience alcohol's depressant effect. They start to feel “stupid” or lose coordination and control.

Alcohol overdose causes even more severe depressant effects (inability to feel pain, toxicity where the body vomits the poison, and finally unconsciousness or, worse, coma or death from severe toxic overdose). These reactions depend on how much is consumed and how quickly.

There are different kinds of alcohol. Ethyl alcohol (ethanol), the only alcohol used in beverages, is produced by the fermentation of grains and fruits. Fermenting is a chemical process whereby yeast acts upon certain ingredients in the food, creating alcohol.



# Alcohol content

**F**ermented drinks, such as beer and wine, contain from 2% alcohol to 20% alcohol. Distilled drinks, or liquor, contain from 40% to 50% or more alcohol. The usual alcohol content for each is:

<b>Beer</b>	<b>2–6% alcohol</b>
<b>Cider</b>	<b>4–8% alcohol</b>
<b>Wine</b>	<b>8–20% alcohol</b>
<b>Tequila</b>	<b>40% alcohol</b>
<b>Rum</b>	<b>40% or more alcohol</b>
<b>Brandy</b>	<b>40% or more alcohol</b>
<b>Gin</b>	<b>40–47% alcohol</b>
<b>Whiskey</b>	<b>40–50% alcohol</b>
<b>Vodka</b>	<b>40–50% alcohol</b>
<b>Liqueurs</b>	<b>15–60% alcohol</b>

# Drinking and driving

● In the United States in 2007, the death toll from teenage drunk-driving accidents was 1,393—nearly four fatalities every day of the year.

● Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death among teenagers in the US and are responsible for more than one in three deaths of American teenagers.

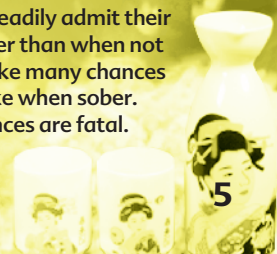
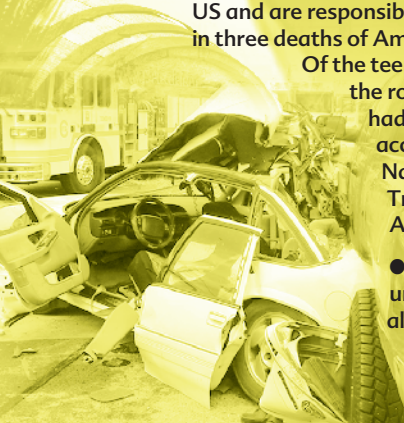
Of the teen drivers killed on the road in 2006, 31% had been drinking, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

● The risk of a driver under the influence of alcohol being killed in

a vehicle accident is at least 11 times that of drivers without alcohol in their system.

For most people, these are only statistics—shocking, perhaps, but only statistics. But for the families and friends of those who die as a result of teenage drinking and driving, each number represents a tragic loss.

Alcohol distorts a person's perceptions and judgment. People under the influence of alcohol readily admit their reaction time is slower than when not drinking, and they take many chances they would never take when sober. Too often those chances are fatal.



# Understanding how alcohol affects the body

**A**lcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream via small blood vessels in the walls of the stomach and small intestine. Within minutes of drinking alcohol, it travels from the stomach to the brain, where it quickly produces its effects, slowing the action of nerve cells.

Approximately 20% of alcohol is absorbed through the stomach. Most of the remaining 80% is absorbed through the small intestine.

Alcohol is also carried by the bloodstream to the liver, which eliminates the alcohol from the blood through a process called “metabolizing,” where it is converted to a non-toxic substance. The liver can only metabolize a certain amount at a time, leaving the excess circulating throughout the body. Thus the intensity of the effect on the body is directly related to the amount consumed.

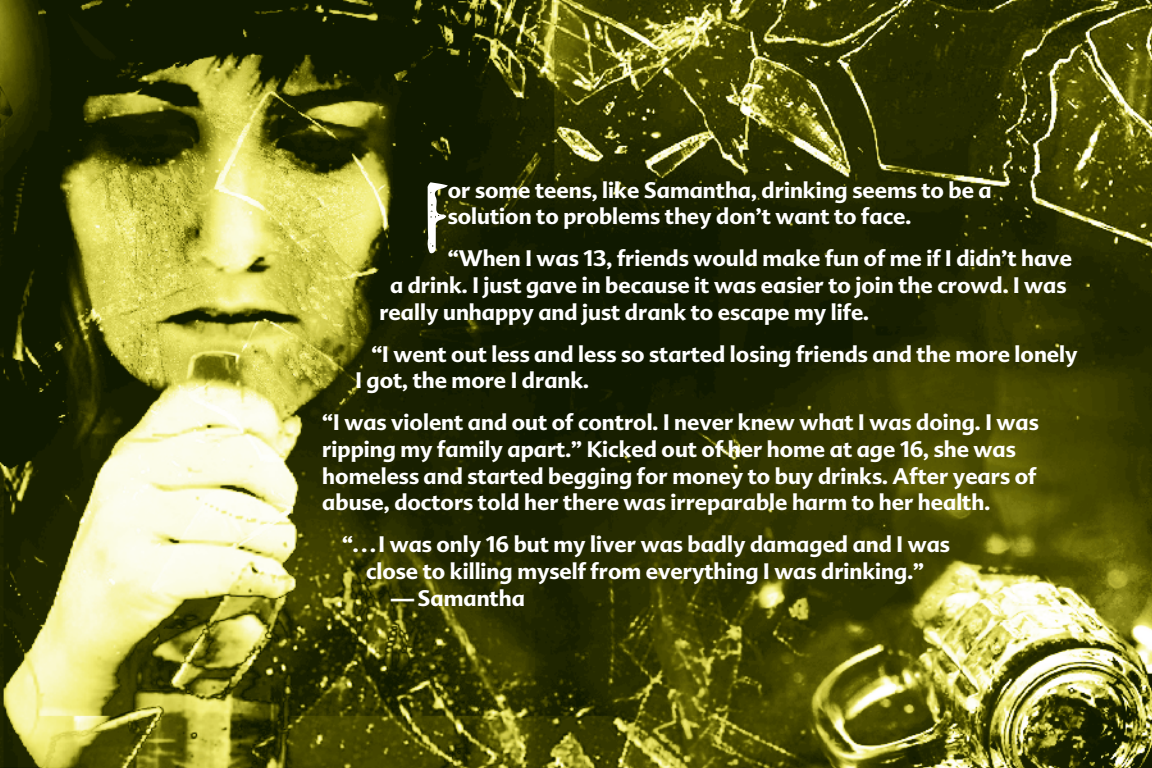
When the amount of alcohol in the blood exceeds a certain level, the respiratory (breathing) system slows down markedly, and can cause a coma or death, because oxygen no longer reaches the brain.

## Young people versus adults What's the difference?

*A young person's body cannot cope with alcohol the same way an adult's can.*

*Drinking is more harmful to teens than adults because their brains are still developing throughout adolescence and well into young adulthood. Drinking during this critical growth period can lead to lifelong damage in brain function, particularly as it relates to memory, motor skills (ability to move) and coordination.*

*According to research, young people who begin drinking before age 15 are 4 times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than those who begin drinking at age 21.*



**F**or some teens, like Samantha, drinking seems to be a solution to problems they don't want to face.

“When I was 13, friends would make fun of me if I didn't have a drink. I just gave in because it was easier to join the crowd. I was really unhappy and just drank to escape my life.

“I went out less and less so started losing friends and the more lonely I got, the more I drank.

“I was violent and out of control. I never knew what I was doing. I was ripping my family apart.” Kicked out of her home at age 16, she was homeless and started begging for money to buy drinks. After years of abuse, doctors told her there was irreparable harm to her health.

“...I was only 16 but my liver was badly damaged and I was close to killing myself from everything I was drinking.”

—Samantha

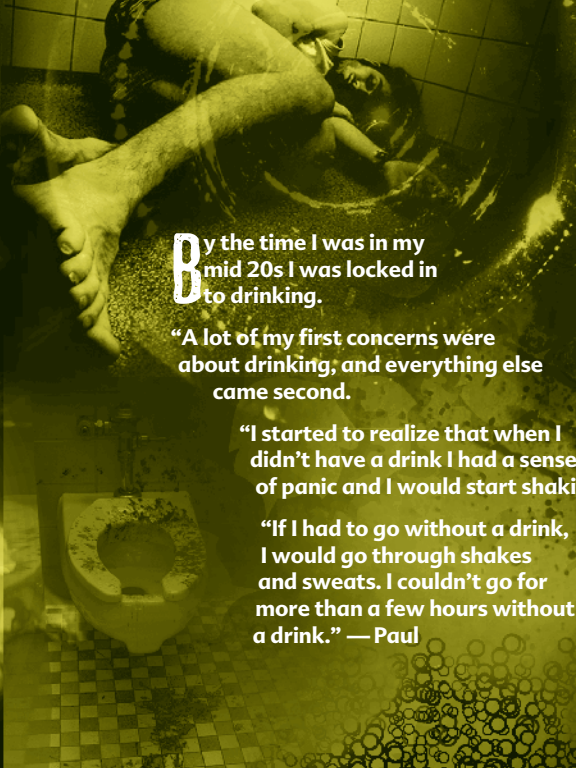
# What is binge drinking?

**B**inge drinking is the practice of consuming large quantities of alcohol in a single session, usually defined as five or more drinks at one time for a man, or four or more drinks at one time for a woman.

About 90% of the alcohol consumed by youth under the age of 21 in the United States is in the form of binge drinks.

I binge drink every chance I get and to be honest I am disgusted with myself, but I cannot control my desire to do it.... If I drink too much or drink certain drinks, I get breathless and go blotchy all over my body, but I continue to drink until I am so exhausted I fall asleep.... I am not sure that I am strong enough to quit my stupidity.” — Allen





**B**y the time I was in my mid 20s I was locked in to drinking.

“A lot of my first concerns were about drinking, and everything else came second.

“I started to realize that when I didn’t have a drink I had a sense of panic and I would start shaking.

“If I had to go without a drink, I would go through shakes and sweats. I couldn’t go for more than a few hours without a drink.” — Paul

**T**his past year I have gone to work drunk, blacked out in clubs and bars and can’t remember getting home. Ashamedly I slept with someone and couldn’t even remember the person coming home with me until we bumped into each other the next day.

“I’ve destroyed two relationships because I hurt them so much through my drinking, but I put drinking first.

“My family are so hurt that their daughter is killing herself for apparently no reason.”  
— Jamie

# What is alcoholism or alcohol dependence?

Alcohol dependence (alcoholism) consists of four symptoms:

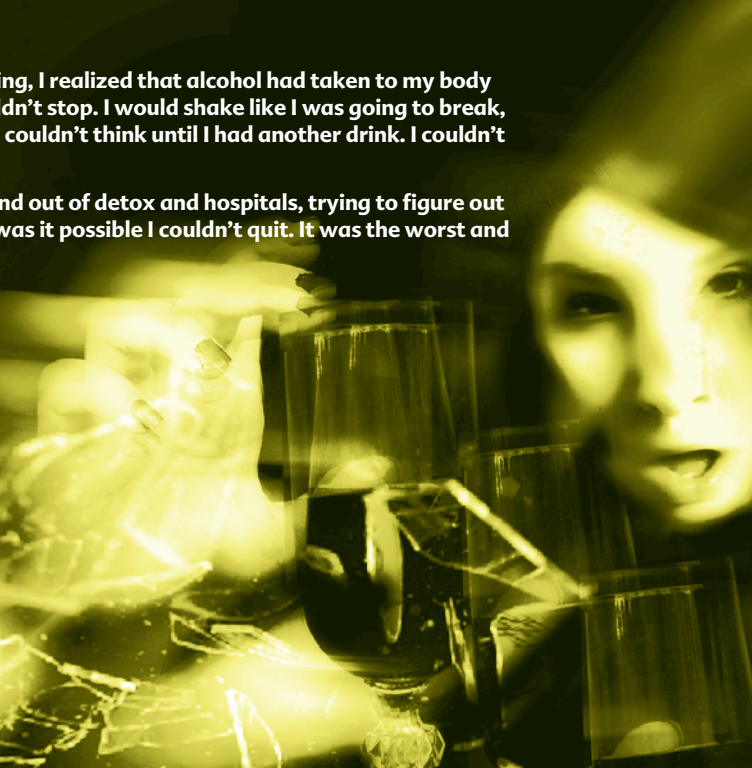
- **Craving:** a strong need, or compulsion, to drink.
- **Loss of control:** the inability to limit one's drinking on any given occasion.
- **Physical dependence:** withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, shakiness, and anxiety, occur when alcohol use is stopped after a period of heavy drinking.
- **Tolerance:** The need to drink greater amounts of alcohol in order to get high.

An increasingly heavy drinker often says he could stop whenever he chooses—he just never “chooses” to do so. Alcoholism is not a *destination*, but a *progression*, a long road of deterioration in which life continuously worsens.

Serious dependence can lead to life-threatening withdrawal symptoms including convulsions, starting 8 to 12

**W**hen I went to quit drinking, I realized that alcohol had taken to my body in such a way that I couldn't stop. I would shake like I was going to break, I would start to sweat, I couldn't think until I had another drink. I couldn't function without it.

**"I spent the next 8 years in and out of detox and hospitals, trying to figure out what happened to me, how was it possible I couldn't quit. It was the worst and longest nightmare." —Jan**



# International statistics

**A**lcohol kills more teenagers than all other drugs combined. It is a factor in the three leading causes of death among 15- to 24-year-olds: accidents, homicides and suicides.

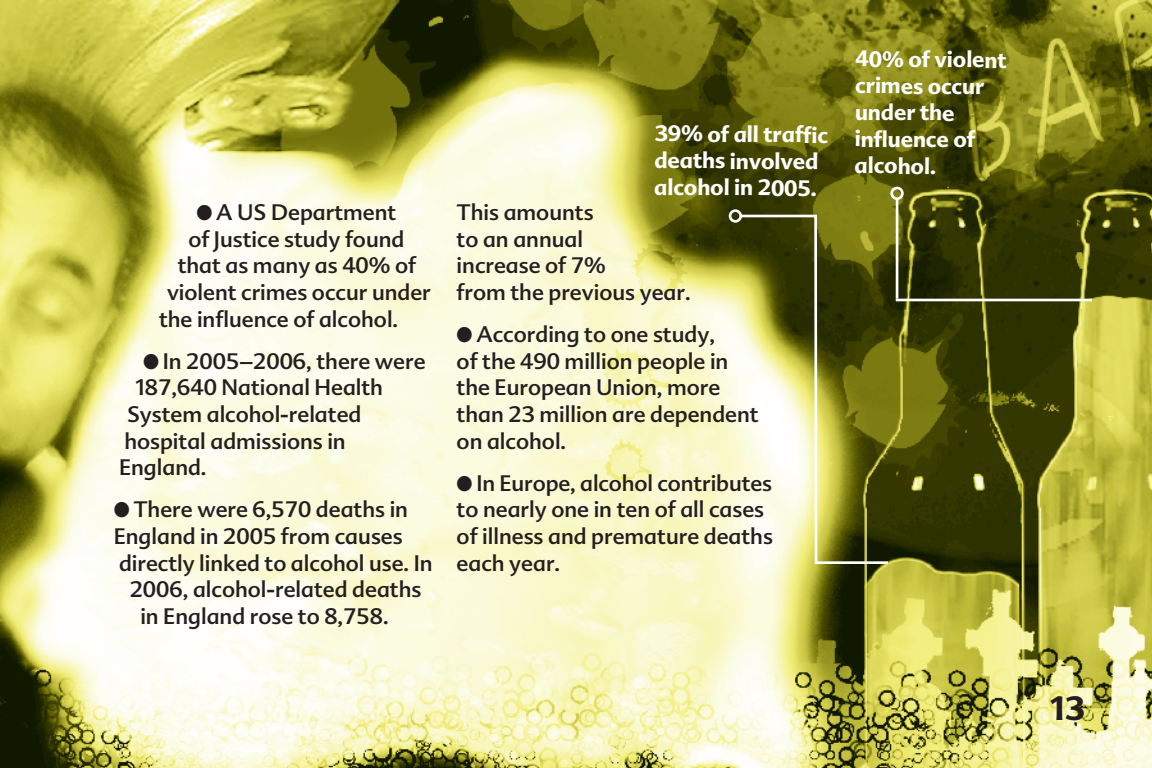
● Youth who drink are 7.5 times more likely to use other illegal drugs and 50 times more likely to use cocaine than young people who never drink. One survey found that 32% of the heavy drinkers over 12 were also illegal drug users.

● In 2005, 6.6% of the US population aged 12 or older, or 16 million people, reported heavy drinking (binge drinking on at least five days of the past 30 days).

● Of the 3.9 million Americans who received treatment for a substance abuse problem in 2005, 2.5 million of them were treated for alcohol use.

● Alcohol-related traffic deaths in the US were 12,998 in 2007. This is more than three times as many American soldiers who died in combat in the first six years of the Iraq war.

● There are 1.4 million drunk driving arrests in the US every year.



● A US Department of Justice study found that as many as 40% of violent crimes occur under the influence of alcohol.

● In 2005–2006, there were 187,640 National Health System alcohol-related hospital admissions in England.

● There were 6,570 deaths in England in 2005 from causes directly linked to alcohol use. In 2006, alcohol-related deaths in England rose to 8,758.

This amounts to an annual increase of 7% from the previous year.

● According to one study, of the 490 million people in the European Union, more than 23 million are dependent on alcohol.

● In Europe, alcohol contributes to nearly one in ten of all cases of illness and premature deaths each year.

39% of all traffic deaths involved alcohol in 2005.

40% of violent crimes occur under the influence of alcohol.



# Short-term effects

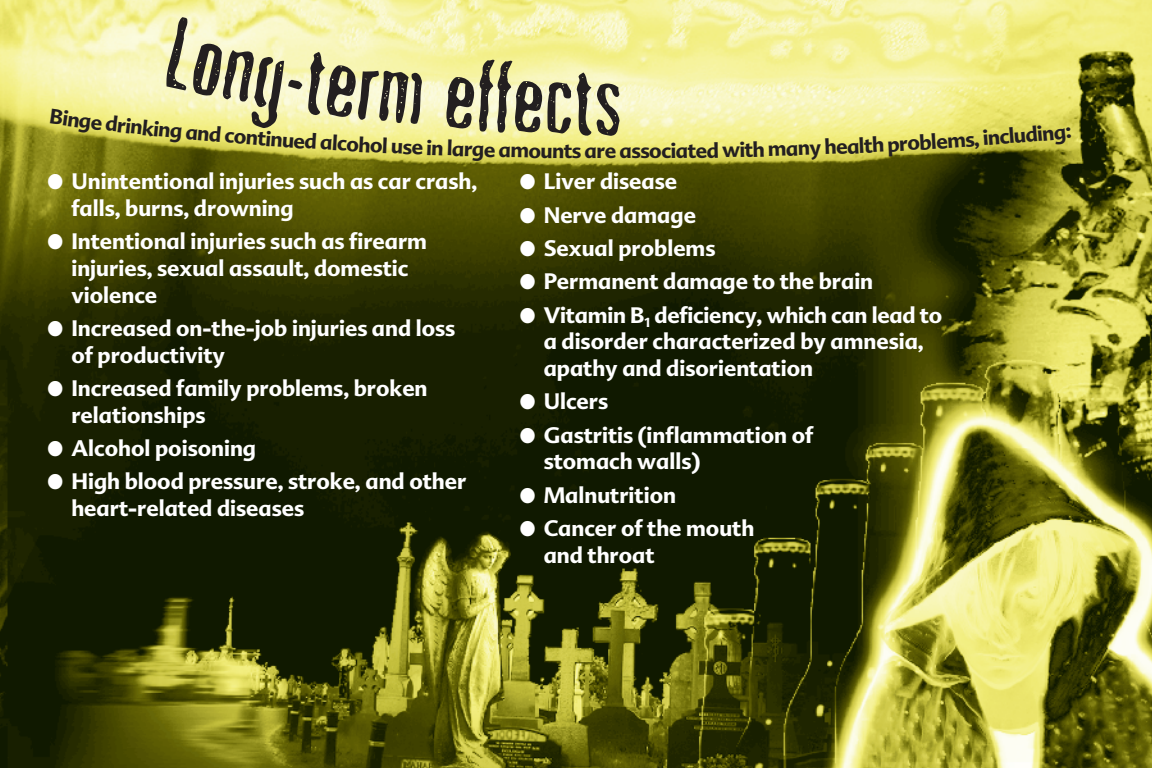
Depending on how much is taken and the physical condition of the individual, alcohol can cause:

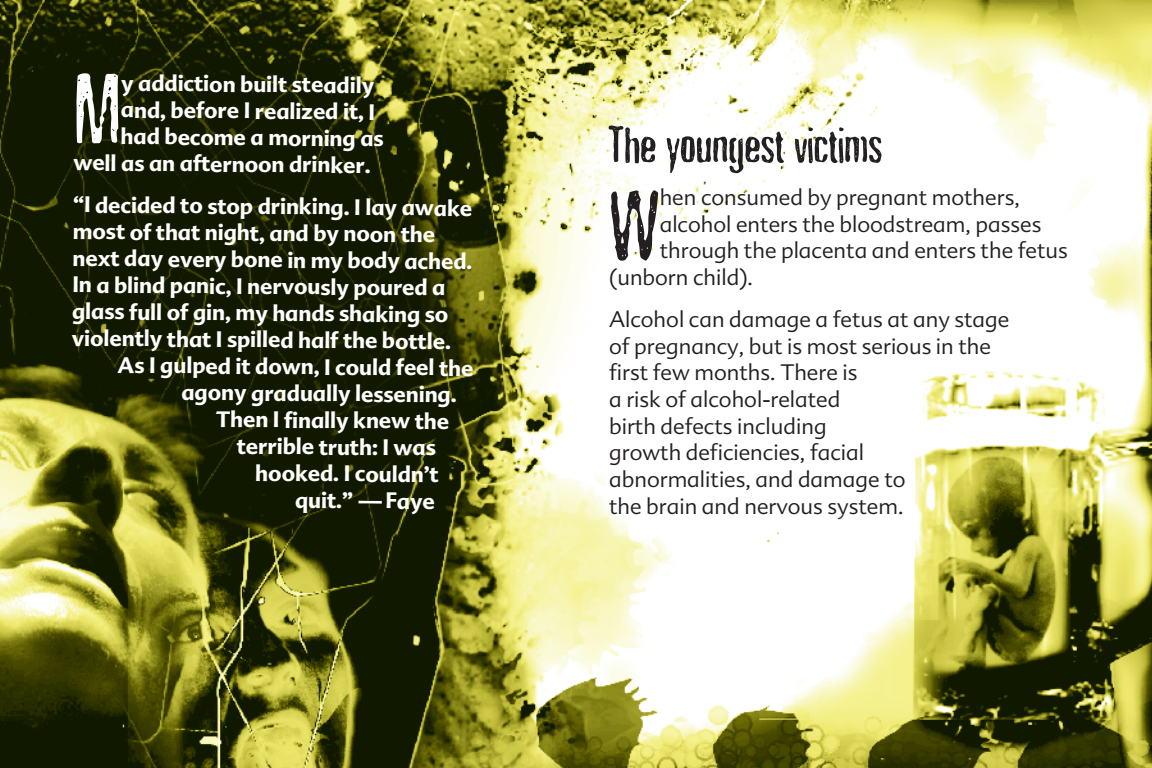
- Slurred speech
- Drowsiness
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Upset stomach
- Headaches
- Breathing difficulties
- Distorted vision and hearing
- Impaired judgment
- Decreased perception and coordination
- Unconsciousness
- Anemia (loss of red blood cells)
- Coma
- Blackouts (memory lapses, where the drinker cannot remember events that occurred while under the influence)

# Long-term effects

Binge drinking and continued alcohol use in large amounts are associated with many health problems, including:

- Unintentional injuries such as car crash, falls, burns, drowning
- Intentional injuries such as firearm injuries, sexual assault, domestic violence
- Increased on-the-job injuries and loss of productivity
- Increased family problems, broken relationships
- Alcohol poisoning
- High blood pressure, stroke, and other heart-related diseases
- Liver disease
- Nerve damage
- Sexual problems
- Permanent damage to the brain
- Vitamin B<sub>1</sub> deficiency, which can lead to a disorder characterized by amnesia, apathy and disorientation
- Ulcers
- Gastritis (inflammation of stomach walls)
- Malnutrition
- Cancer of the mouth and throat





**M**y addiction built steadily and, before I realized it, I had become a morning as well as an afternoon drinker.

“I decided to stop drinking. I lay awake most of that night, and by noon the next day every bone in my body ached. In a blind panic, I nervously poured a glass full of gin, my hands shaking so violently that I spilled half the bottle.

As I gulped it down, I could feel the agony gradually lessening.

Then I finally knew the terrible truth: I was hooked. I couldn't quit.” — Faye

## The youngest victims

**W**hen consumed by pregnant mothers, alcohol enters the bloodstream, passes through the placenta and enters the fetus (unborn child).

Alcohol can damage a fetus at any stage of pregnancy, but is most serious in the first few months. There is a risk of alcohol-related birth defects including growth deficiencies, facial abnormalities, and damage to the brain and nervous system.





## A trail of tragedy

**A**lcohol has claimed the lives of many gifted artists, musicians and writers over the past decades. These are just a few:

**John Bonham (1948–1980):** Excessive alcohol led to the tragic death of Led Zeppelin drummer John “Bonzo” Bonham, best known for his drum solo “Moby Dick.” He was found dead of asphyxiation from vomit after a night of heavy drinking, on his way to rehearsals for an upcoming tour.

**Steve Clark (1960–1991):** Guitarist for Def Leppard. A heavy drinker, he died in his London home of a lethal combination of alcohol and drugs.

**Micheal Clarke (1946–1993):** American musician, drummer for The Byrds. He died of liver failure after three decades of heavy alcohol consumption.

**Brian Connolly (1945–1997):** Scottish rock vocalist and lead singer for Sweet. His drinking problem caused him to leave the band in 1978; he reunited years later but his drinking had damaged his health and he died of liver failure in 1997.

**Oliver Reed (1938–1999):** British actor known for his roles in *Oliver!*, *Women in Love*, *The Three Musketeers* and *Gladiator*. He died from a sudden heart attack during a break from filming *Gladiator*. He was heavily intoxicated after 3 bottles of rum, 8 bottles of beer and numerous doubles of whiskey.

# Alcohol:

Fermented grain, fruit juice and honey have been used to make alcohol (ethyl alcohol or ethanol) for thousands of years.

Fermented beverages existed in early Egyptian civilization, and there is evidence of an early alcoholic drink in China around 7000 B.C. In India, an alcoholic beverage called sura, distilled from rice, was in use between 3000 and 2000 B.C.

The Babylonians worshiped a wine goddess as early as 2700 B.C. In Greece, one of the first alcoholic beverages to gain popularity was mead, a fermented drink made from honey and water. Greek literature is full of warnings against excessive drinking.

Several Native American civilizations developed alcoholic beverages in pre-Columbian\* times. A variety of fermented beverages from the Andes region of South America

\* pre-Columbian: before the arrival in America of Christopher Columbus in 1492.

**Fermented beverages  
in early Egyptian  
civilization**

# A Short History

were created from corn, grapes or apples, called “chicha.”

In the 16th century, alcohol (called “spirits”) was used largely for medicinal purposes. At the beginning of the 18th century, the British parliament passed a law encouraging the use of grain for distilling spirits. Cheap spirits flooded the market and reached a peak in the mid-18th century. In Britain, gin consumption reached 18 million gallons and alcoholism became widespread.

The 19th century brought a change in attitudes and the temperance movement began promoting the moderate use of alcohol—which ultimately became a push for total prohibition.

In 1920 the US passed a law prohibiting the manufacture, sale, import and export of intoxicating liquors. The illegal alcohol trade boomed and by 1933, the prohibition of alcohol was cancelled.

Today, an estimated 15 million Americans suffer from alcoholism and 40% of all car accident deaths in the US involve alcohol.



# The Truth About Drugs

**D**rugs are essentially poisons. The amount taken determines the effect.

A small amount acts as a stimulant (speeds you up). A greater amount acts as a sedative (slows you down). An even larger amount poisons and can kill.

This is true of any drug. Only the amount needed to achieve the effect differs.

But many drugs have another liability: they directly affect the mind. They can distort the user's perception of what is happening around him or her. As a result, the person's actions may be odd, irrational, inappropriate and even destructive.

Drugs block off all sensations, the desirable ones with the unwanted. So, while providing short-term help in the relief of pain, they also wipe out ability and alertness and muddy one's thinking.

Medicines are drugs that are intended to speed up or slow down or change something about the way your body is working, to try to make it work better. Sometimes they are necessary. But they are still drugs: they act as stimulants or sedatives, and too much can kill you. So if you do not use medicines as they are supposed to be used, they can be as dangerous as illegal drugs.

**The real answer is to get  
the facts and not to take  
drugs in the first place.**



# WHY DO PEOPLE TAKE DRUGS?

People take drugs because they want to change something in their lives.

Here are some of the reasons young people have given for taking drugs:

- To fit in
- To escape or relax
- To relieve boredom
- To seem grown up
- To rebel
- To experiment

They think drugs are a solution. But eventually, the drugs become the problem.

Difficult as it may be to face one's problems, the consequences of drug use are always worse than the problem one is trying to solve with them. The real answer is to get the facts and not to take drugs in the first place.



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Millions of copies of booklets such as this have been distributed to people around the world in 22 languages. As new drugs appear on the streets and more information about their effects becomes known, existing booklets are updated and new ones created.

The booklets are published by the Foundation for a Drug-Free World, a nonprofit public benefit organization headquartered in Los Angeles, California.

The Foundation provides educational materials, advice and coordination for its international drug prevention network. It works with youth, parents, educators, volunteer organizations and government agencies—anyone with an interest in helping people lead lives free from drug abuse.

# FACTS YOU NEED TO KNOW

This booklet is one in a series of publications that cover the facts about marijuana, alcohol, Ecstasy, cocaine, crack cocaine, crystal meth and methamphetamine, inhalants, heroin, LSD and prescription drug abuse. Armed with this information, the reader can make the decision to live a drug-free life.



**For more information or to obtain more copies of this or other booklets in this series, contact:**

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