

What are the hidden harms of alcohol use?

What do you think of when you hear the words “alcohol” and “harm” in the same sentence? A night you can’t remember? A bad hangover in the morning? The fact is that the harms of alcohol are actually a lot greater and the majority of them are a lot more long-term.

Ireland is stereotyped all over the world as a country that likes to drink. However much we deny it, the fact is it’s true. We are ranked among the highest consumers of alcohol in the EU and 44% of Irish adults binge drink on a regular basis, which is more than any other European country. Most shockingly, we are the second biggest drinkers in the world, according to The World Health Organisation. This has drastic effects on the health of the Irish population.

The majority of health effects of alcohol are long term, therefore the earlier you start drinking the more prone you are to suffer from them. This is a major factor in Irish health as 64% of men and 51% of women started drinking before the legal age of 18, and 9% of girls and 13% of boys surveyed admitted to first getting drunk before or at 13 years of age.

These health effects include: cancer, liver diseases, heart disease and high blood pressure which can lead to many other illnesses. Alcohol abuse is attributable to 88 deaths every month in Ireland and twice as many deaths than all other drugs in Ireland combined. Health effects of alcohol can begin even before birth. If a woman drinks while pregnant, which 2 out of 3 Irish women

do, babies could be born with facial, height, and central nervous system defects. In extreme cases it can even result in miscarriage or stillbirth.

However, not all alcohol related deaths are directly due to health problems, drink driving is a big problem in Ireland. Drink driving is not recommended, as any amount of alcohol consumption impairs driving and increases the risk of collision, but it is legal in Ireland as long as the driver's blood alcohol level is below 50mg. However, while most fatal road crashes are caused by drunk drivers, 1 in 5 drivers killed on Irish roads, where alcohol was involved, were under the old legal limit (80mg) when they died. Alcohol reaches the brain in minutes and impairs driving skills significantly so the best advice is to not drink at all if you are going to be driving.

Suicide is also a direct result of death from alcohol abuse, as it is a factor in many suicide cases. The World Health Organisation has estimated that when alcohol is being abused, suicide is eight times more likely. An Irish study has shown similar results: that half of those who committed suicide had abused alcohol in the past 12 months. It cannot be denied that alcohol and suicide are closely linked, especially in Ireland, with the leading cause of death for 15-24 year-old males being suicide, which corresponds closely with harmful drinking being highest in Ireland between 18-24 years old.

While all of these statistics can be shocking and can really make you think, they can be quite hard to relate to personally. Just think, do you know someone who drinks a bit too much? If you yourself drink, ask yourself, how many drinks you would have every week? Most Irish people have attended a game in Ireland's biggest stadium, Croke Park, if you've ever been there, just think

how big it is. In Ireland there are 100,000 children who are abused by or stressed about problematic drinkers in their families. This is more than the capacity of Croke Park, so you can visualise just how many that is.

In the future when you are having a drink and you think to yourself, "One more won't hurt." Think again, because in the long run, it will.

Sources

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