**What are the hidden harms of Alcohol Use?**

Have you ever wondered why our country is stereotyped as a nation of “binge drinkers?” Has the thought ever crossed your mind that the effects of excessive alcohol consumption run deeper than the “booziness” that is immediately apparent? Have you ever once considered that heavy drinking can leave those who surround you traumatised and facing uncertain futures? And have you ever guessed there may be a reason why alcohol guidelines are called “low risk” and not “safe”? Because there is NO such thing as risk-free drinking, and NOBODY can guarantee “safe” alcohol consumption.

We are all aware of the fact that binge drinking can result in hangovers and drunken behaviour. But what few are aware of are the *hidden* harms of alcohol use. Alcohol threatens our entire society, and the drinking problem in Ireland is spiralling out of control. To quote the Minister for Health, Leo Varadkar, on issuing recent legislation to combat this critical issue,“We have talked about these measures for long enough. Now is the time to make it happen.”

Unknown to so many in the population are the hidden health risks attributed to alcohol use. While many assume the effects of a drinking binge will wear off after a day or two, unfortunately the contrary is the truth. While a hangover will pass, alcohol can result in long-term health problems, such as heart disease, liver problems or an irregular heartbeat. It can also lead to a higher risk of cancer of the throat, oesophagus or larynx, and breast cancer in women. Regularly drinking just above the guidelines increases the risk of breast cancer by 20%, and regularly drinking two glasses of wine a day could make you *three* times more likely to develop mouth cancer.

The hidden impacts of alcohol consumption on teenagers are truly devastating. According to a survey, around half of Ireland’s teenagers consume alcohol. These teenagers are the most vulnerable consumers of alcohol, as their bodies and brains are still developing. Scientific studies have shown physical changes in the brain and evidence of impaired problem solving, memory and learning resulting from young people’s alcohol use, as compared to their peers who do not drink alcohol. Alcohol consumption poses a serious threat to their health and well-being, and can lead to alcohol addiction in later life.

Alcohol use also results in hidden pressures on the health services of the state. Can you believe that a staggering total of 1,500 hospital beds are occupied every night for reasons relating to alcohol consumption? The total bills from the healthcare system, the criminal justice system and the cost of road accidents as a result of irresponsible drinking amount to millions each year.

And what about the risk to family members living with regular drinkers? These are the hidden sufferers in our country. They are often the victims of physical violence and verbal abuse. Sadly, there are over 100,000 children in Ireland whose families are affected by alcoholism. Many of these children risk being left in unsupervised or unsafe conditions as a result of a family member’s drinking. And the effects of alcohol on families doesn’t end there. The average Irish drinker spends approximately 2,000 euro on alcohol every year, and as you can imagine, these bills are taking their toll on many families, and result in huge financial pressure, and in many cases, spiralling debts.

Perhaps one of the most frequently overlooked hidden harms of alcohol use is the consumption of it as a cure for mental health. For some people who suffer from anxiety or depression, they lean on alcohol to help alleviate their symptoms. They think a little drink will help them feel better and make their problems go away. However, they don’t realise that this is the beginning of a vicious circle, as alcohol is a depressant. Alcohol consumption lowers the levels of serotonin in your brain. Instead of brightening your day, things can seem a lot gloomier. Many suicides in Ireland have been proven to have a connection with alcohol use.

We can see the effects of drinking on our society, we know how many lives are negatively impacted by alcohol. If we want to combat this escalating problem, we need to educate both young and old on the hidden risks. *Only* when the “hidden” harms of alcohol use are no longer hidden, but openly acknowledged, only then can we hope to see a decline in alcohol consumption in our country.

**Alcohol Ireland-** [**http://alcoholireland.ie/facts/**](http://alcoholireland.ie/facts/)

**Alcohol Think Again-** [**http://alcoholthinkagain.com.au/Parents-Young-People/Alcohol-and-the-Developing-Brain/Impact-of-Alcohol-on-the-developing-brain**](http://alcoholthinkagain.com.au/Parents-Young-People/Alcohol-and-the-Developing-Brain/Impact-of-Alcohol-on-the-developing-brain)

**Irish Examiner-** [**http://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/survey-reveals-irish-fork-out-2000-a-year-on-alcohol-152623.html**](http://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/survey-reveals-irish-fork-out-2000-a-year-on-alcohol-152623.html)

**NHS Change 4 Life -** [**http://www.nhs.uk/Change4Life/Pages/alcohol-health-harms.aspx**](http://www.nhs.uk/Change4Life/Pages/alcohol-health-harms.aspx)