

Underage Drinking and the Risks

By: Khawla Yousif

The Irish are notorious for drinking. We've all heard of the stereotypical drunk Irish persona, and Guinness is a brand sold in over 150 countries, including countries in Africa. I never realised how far-reaching this image of Irish people is until a couple of years ago. My family is Sudanese, and even though my siblings and I were born and raised here, we grew up spending every second summer in Sudan. . I was at a wedding, and a guest asked me where I was from. I answered with "Ireland". Now, not many people in Sudan have heard of Ireland, let alone know where it is. In fact, I distinctly remember getting offended every time someone asked where we were from (because we spoke English) and my mum replied 'London' because she didn't want to have to explain where Ireland was. So you can imagine my shock when she replied "Oh that's where there are a lot of drunk people, right?" I was caught off guard and I had no idea how to respond. What I did know, however was I didn't want Sudanese people to associate Ireland with alcohol.

This small incident caused me to ponder just how much alcohol is embedded into our culture. So much so that young people will inevitably be exposed to it, if not by raiding their parents cabinet, then at any celebratory occasion, where alcoholic drinks seem to be a staple. Drinking at any age is risky, but it is especially dangerous for young people.

An event that further fuelled my interest in this subject was a talk given at our school by two recovering alcoholics. Their fascinating and informative stories struck me by how similar they were. They had both begun drinking at the age of 14, both used alcohol as a coping mechanism and to suppress emotions of inferiority and fear. They both drank to the point of blacking out the first time they consumed alcohol, and their addiction began a downward spiral into a myriad of other problems including financial difficulties, broken relationships, physical injuries, being fired and being evicted from their homes. Their stories were a touching illustration of the devastating effects of alcohol.

Drinking underage makes you vulnerable to all kinds of physical harm. Research shows adolescents who tested positive for alcohol were more likely to get injured or have accidents than non-drinkers. This is due to alcohol inhibiting their mental and physical capabilities, hindering sound judgement. Underage drinkers are more likely to suffer from a range of health issues including weight loss, disturbed sleep and headaches. Drinking can increase the risk of developing liver disease and young people who drink regularly start to damage their livers without realising. Compared to non-drinkers, underage drinkers are more likely to smoke tobacco, use cannabis or use other hard drugs. This opens the door to even more health problems and further endangers the young person.

People who drink underage also risk the dismal consequences of alcohol poisoning, a severe and potentially fatal reaction to an alcohol overdose. It occurs when the level of blood alcohol gets so high that it seriously affect the parts of the brain that control balance and speech, as well as affect the nerves that control your breathing and heartbeat and lower your body temperature, which can lead to hypothermia. It can also cancel your gag reflex, putting you at serious risk of choking to death, especially if you vomit. In the U.S. in 2014, there were nearly 4,000 admissions of under-18s related to alcohol poisoning.

Alcohol is especially harmful to teenage girls. Alcohol abuse can delay puberty in girls and can cause endocrine disorders during puberty. Teenage girls who drink are more likely to

have unprotected sex than girls who don't drink, putting them at increased risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Alcohol is more harmful to the developing brains of teenagers than to those of adults. Teenagers who regularly drink are jeopardising their education. Alcohol can affect memory function, reactions, learning ability and attention span – all especially important during school years. Binge drinking (consuming five or more drinks at a sitting, for males, four or more for females) can cause teenagers to pass out, lose memory of events that occurred while they were intoxicated, feel sick, miss school, or behave uncharacteristically. Binge drinkers are eight times more likely to miss classes and to fall behind in schoolwork than non-drinkers.

According to the HSE, people who drink before they turn 15 are four times more likely to develop alcoholism than those who start drinking at the age of 21. This greater vulnerability to addiction is because the pleasure centre of the brain matures before the part of the brain responsible for impulse control and executive decision making. In other words, teenagers' capacity for pleasure reaches adult proportions well before their capacity for sound decision making does.

Alcohol not only imperils the consumer of it but all those around them. Loud and unruly behaviour, property destruction, unintentional injuries, violence, and even death because of underage alcohol use are all second-hand effects that afflict innocent parties. For example, about 45% of people who die in crashes involving a drinking driver under the age of 21 are people other than the driver. Such second-hand effects often strike at random, making underage alcohol use truly everybody's problem.

More than 1/4 of Irish teenagers started drinking at 13 or younger. 3/4 of Irish teenagers had had alcohol at some point by the time they reached 15 or 16 and just over 1/3 said they had been drunk in the month they took the survey in.

The European School Survey Project which carried out this survey warned that the school/class participation rates in Ireland of 18% were exceptionally low. Ireland had one of the highest rates of parents refusing children permission to participate in the study. (4%) 91% of adults agree that underage drinking is a problem in Ireland today. There is consensus that underage drinking is a problem. However, we must learn the extent of it before we can propose, discuss and implement solutions.

Sources:

<https://www.independent.ie/breaking-news/irish-news/more-than-25-of-irish-teenagers-began-drinking-at-13-or-under-study-finds-35064501.html>

<https://www.helpguide.org/harvard/the-dangers-of-teenage-drinking.htm>

<https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/advice/underage-drinking/know-the-risks-of-drinking-alcohol-underage/>

https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/media/pressrel/newsarchive/2008_Archive/May_2008/Underage_Drinking.html.

<http://alcoholireland.ie/binge-drinking-takes-hold-for-irish-teens/>