

The facts about...

# Alcohol and **risk-taking**



**Five key  
things you  
need to  
know**

for the facts  
**drinkaware.co.uk**

**You're invincible. If Batman needed a new apprentice, you would be it. Spiderman couldn't climb walls like you could right now. You could definitely manage a few rounds with boxing legend Lennox Lewis.**

This is how alcohol can distort your perceptions, making you think you're safer, stronger and smarter than you actually are.

Drinking to excess affects your ability to make rational decisions which can lead you to take risks you wouldn't when sober. It means the consequences of a night's drinking are much more than a bad hangover. You might get in trouble with the police, destroy relationships with friends, your partner or family, or seriously harm yourself and others. The best way to avoid risky behaviour is to cut down on how much you're drinking.

1

## Alcohol encourages risky behaviour

Alcohol is a depressant. That means it affects your senses in two main ways.

Firstly, with alcohol in your body you're more likely to act on urges you may normally suppress. So you might feel braver and less inhibited – and more likely to say things that you'll regret<sup>1</sup>. This is made even more dangerous because alcohol also inhibits the nervous system. It's this system that gives you the "fight or flight" reaction, which would normally cause you to become more cautious.

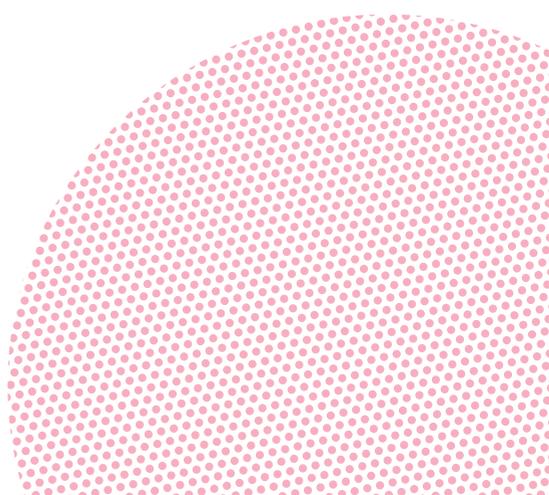
Secondly, for the same reason, alcohol deadens pain and relieves anxiety on a temporary basis<sup>2,3</sup>. So the day after you've been drinking, you might be in more physical – and emotional – pain than you felt the night before.

Both of these encourage risky behaviour because they influence the decisions you make when you've had too much to drink.

<sup>1</sup> C. Fernando Valenzuela, M.D., PH.D., Alcohol and Neurotransmitter Interactions. Available at <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/arh21-2/144.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Volkow, N et al 1995, 'Monitoring the Brain's Response to Alcohol with Positron Emission Tomography', Alcohol Health vol 19, no 4, pp 296-299.

<sup>3</sup> Volpicelli, J et al 1999, 'The Role of Uncontrollable Trauma in the Development of PTSD and Alcohol Addiction', Alcohol Research and Health vol 23, pp 256-262.



2

## You're more likely to have an accident when you've been drinking<sup>4</sup>

Drinking alcohol:

- **makes it difficult to co-ordinate your movements so even a simple task like making a hot drink is riskier**
- **stops you thinking clearly so you're less able to judge situations, which is why crossing a busy road can become more dangerous.<sup>5</sup>**
- **temporarily makes you feel good<sup>6</sup> so you're less likely to notice when something bad is happening around you.**



3

## It can be hard to judge how much is too much

Everyone reacts differently to alcohol. Your height, weight and gender are just some of the factors that play a part in how it affects you. Even what you've had to eat that day or how much sleep you've had recently can make a difference to how you feel when you drink.

Drinking more alcohol than your body can handle is very risky. Even if you're used to its effects, it can still be hard to judge how much is 'too much'. Drink a lot in a short space of time and the amount of alcohol in the blood can stop the body from working properly. Two large glasses of wine may not seem like very much but drinking these six units of alcohol in an hour will raise your blood alcohol concentration (BAC) and could make you drunk very quickly. Drinking the same amount over several hours accompanied by food will not have the same effect on your BAC.

Binge drinking (drinking over double the daily unit guidelines in one session) in this way is a major factor in accidents, violence and anti-social behaviour.



<sup>4</sup> NHS information Centre for health and social care, Statistics on Alcohol: England, 2012. P61. Available at <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/pubs/alcohol12>

<sup>5</sup> Volkow, N et al 1995, 'Monitoring the Brain's Response to Alcohol with Positron Emission Tomography', Alcohol Health vol 19, no 4, pp 296-299.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

4

## Alcohol can influence decisions you make about sex

When you're caught up in the heat of the moment it's hard to think about anything else but the person you're with. Add alcohol into the mix, and it's even more difficult to keep a clear head – which can lead to some risky behaviour:

### One night stands

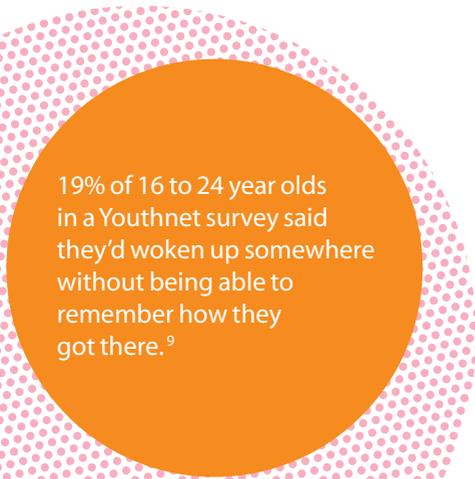
Alcohol can cloud your judgement so you're more likely to have one night stands. In one survey, nearly half (48%) of 16–25-year-olds said they had a one night stand they regretted because they were drunk.<sup>7</sup>

### Unsafe sex

A condom is the best protection against sexually transmitted infections or unplanned pregnancies, but studies show that you're three times more likely to have sex without one if you've been drinking. Alcohol also messes with your motor skills which means that you or your partner may rip the condom with your fingernails or put it on incorrectly so it won't offer the right level of protection.

### Sexual assaults

Sadly, alcohol can make you more vulnerable. Alcohol plays a large part in sexual assaults and is the drug most commonly used to spike drinks in cases of date rape.<sup>8</sup>



19% of 16 to 24 year olds in a Youthnet survey said they'd woken up somewhere without being able to remember how they got there.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> YouthNet website, Alcohol and Sex: Young People's Attitudes and Behaviours (PDF) <http://www.youthnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Young-people-alcohol-and-sex-Research-Report-April-2012.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Hall, J 2007, 'Alcohol is the Most Common Date Rape Drug', University of Ulster.

<sup>9</sup> YouthNet website, Alcohol and Sex: Young People's Attitudes and Behaviours (PDF) <http://www.youthnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Young-people-alcohol-and-sex-Research-Report-April-2012.pdf>

5

## Drinking too much can make you feel angry - and lead to trouble with the police

Alcohol lowers your inhibitions. At the same time, if your mood's low, alcohol can make it lower and so you can be more aggressive.

That's why drinking too much can make you feel angry and more likely to start arguments about things that won't seem important the next day. More seriously, alcohol plays a part in a lot of crime, it's a factor in:

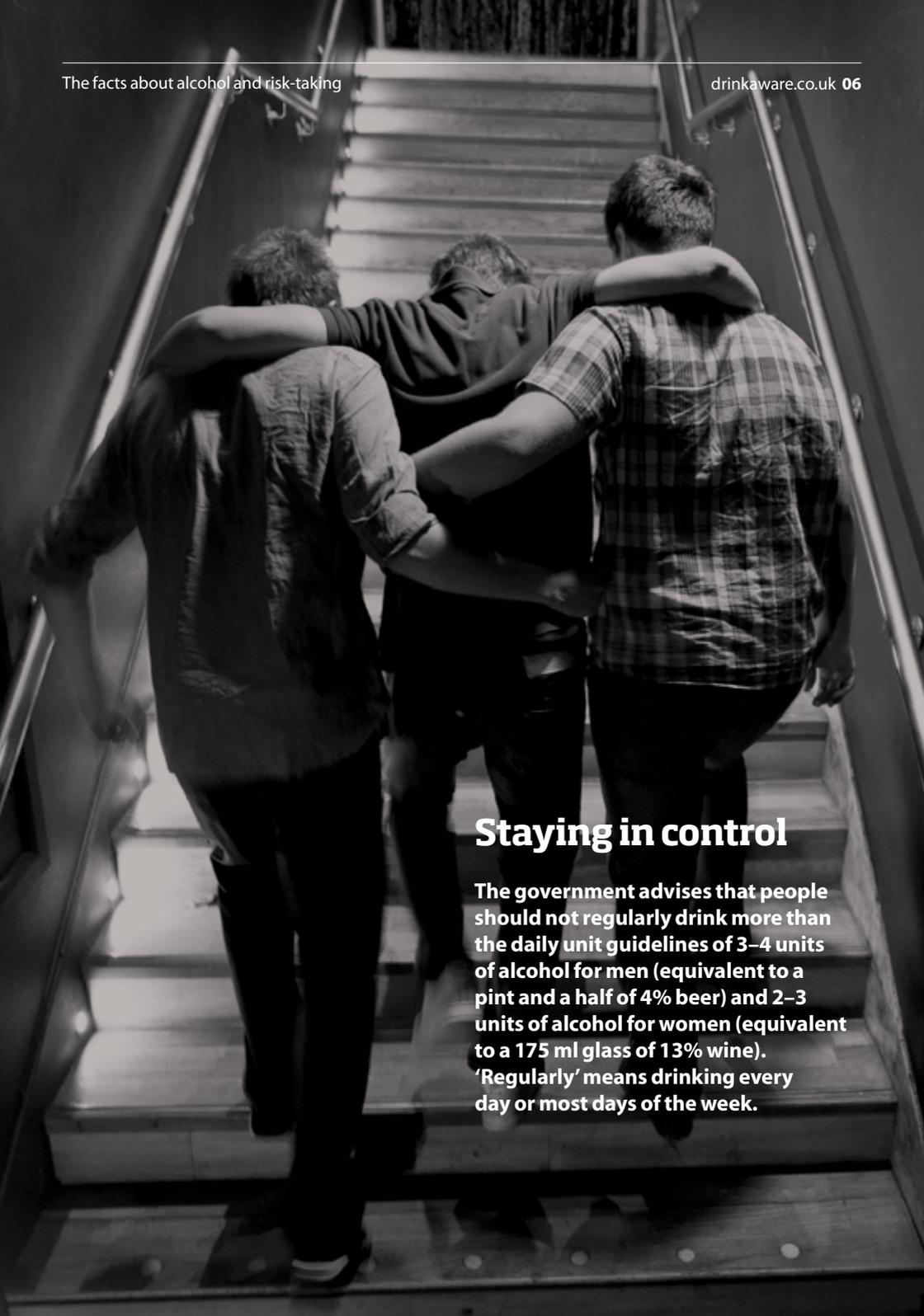
- **one in three (33%) burglaries**
- **one in two (50%) street crimes**
- **nearly one in three (30%) sexual offences**
- **half (50%) of all violent incidents<sup>10</sup>**

Being drunk, or just being around drunk people, makes you more likely to get into trouble. It might be your friends or a stranger that starts things, but the consequences could affect you.

The majority of people who drink are never violent and even those who do become aggressive won't do so all the time.



<sup>10</sup> Parliament website, Binge drinking and public health, July 2005. Available at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/briefing-papers/POST-PN-244>



## Staying in control

The government advises that people should not regularly drink more than the daily unit guidelines of 3–4 units of alcohol for men (equivalent to a pint and a half of 4% beer) and 2–3 units of alcohol for women (equivalent to a 175 ml glass of 13% wine). 'Regularly' means drinking every day or most days of the week.

Here are three ways you can avoid risky situations when you've been drinking:

**A Keep in touch.**

If you decide to leave your friends during a night out, or when leaving their house to go home, let them know where you are going. Plan your route home or book a taxi in advance and make sure you text or call your friends to let them know you got there okay.

**B Practise safe sex.**

Carry a condom with you in a safe place like your wallet or purse when you go out, whether you're planning on drinking alcohol or not. Don't forget to replace it, or you'll be caught short next time!

**C Keep an eye on how much you've had.**

Track your drinks on the go using MyDrinkaware. Use it easily on your smartphone by logging on to [drinkaware.co.uk](https://drinkaware.co.uk).

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# We've got the answers at **drinkaware.co.uk**

## Advice

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## Other useful contacts

For the facts on alcohol and to keep track of your units through our MyDrinkaware tool, visit the Drinkaware website [drinkaware.co.uk](http://drinkaware.co.uk)

Your GP can help you figure out if you should make any changes to your drinking, and offer help and advice.

If you're concerned about someone's drinking, or your own, Drinkline runs a free, confidential helpline. Call 0800 917 8282.

For young people, visit The Site for regularly updated guides that take a comprehensive look at alcohol, drugs and much more. [www.thesite.org](http://www.thesite.org)

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