

Alcohol after brain injury - tips for families, friends and carers



the brain injury association

Introduction

Alcohol is a drug that is commonly used as part of many social and recreational activities. A common effect of drinking alcohol is to make people feel relaxed, but it can also impair a number of skills such as information processing, making decisions, memory, mobility, attention, and others.

A person's tolerance to alcohol reduces after brain injury, so many brain injury survivors become more sensitive to it. Effects of brain injury might also worsen under the influence of alcohol.

Survivors might question how safe it is for them to drink alcohol, and choose to give up drinking altogether. Others might begin drinking alcohol as a coping mechanism to deal with the various difficult changes that a brain injury can bring to life. As a family member, friend or carer, this might leave you feeling concerned for their health, safety and welfare.

This publication has been written to offer guidance on how to help a brain injury survivor who is continuing to drink alcohol after brain injury. A separate publication for brain injury survivors themselves has been published by Headway and contains further detail on this topic. To view our publication for brain injury survivors, visit www.headway.org.uk/information-library.

If you are concerned about your own or someone else's drinking behaviour and are looking for general advice or support, contact www.drinkaware.co.uk on 0300 123 1110.

Details of other useful organisations are provided at the end of this publication.

Drinking after brain injury

Alcohol is classified as a depressant drug, although it is commonly used as part of many social and recreational activities.

Being a depressant drug means that it has a dampening effect on a number of

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skills that the brain is responsible for by affecting the delicate balance of chemical processes in the brain. Alcohol can impair a number of skills such as information processing, making decisions, memory, mobility, attention and others.

Drinking alcohol is generally discouraged after brain injury. Some of the main reasons for this are given below:

Increased sensitivity to alcohol

Brain injury survivors generally have a reduced tolerance to alcohol and are more sensitive to its effects. This is because the chemical processes that take place after drinking alcohol happen much faster in brain injury survivors than in people who do not have a brain injury. They therefore may get 'drunk' a lot faster than others with no brain injury.

Effects of brain injury that the survivor experiences can also worsen under the influence of alcohol, such as memory problems, behavioural issues, depression or problems with managing anger.

This increased sensitivity to alcohol can have serious safety implications for situations such as crossing the road. **You should never drink and drive, or allow a brain injury survivor to drink and drive**, as it can be impossible to know how a brain injury has affected their ability to drink and stay under the legal limit. Further guidance about drink driving is available at www.met.police.uk.

Increased risk of accidents

Drinking alcohol can affect mobility and many people find that they walk unsteadily after drinking. This comes with a risk of falling or bumping into objects. In fact, research finds that many people admitted to hospital with a head injury were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the accident.

Alcohol can also cause people to engage in more risky behaviour, putting them at more risk of being involved in an accident such as a road traffic collision or falling from a height.

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Effects of brain injury that are worsened under the influence of alcohol might also put the brain injury survivor in risky situations, such as worsened memory problems causing the survivor to forget how to get home. If you are with the survivor while drinking, it might be that you are able to support them while you are with them, but do also think about the possible consequences of drinking for the survivor when you are not there, such as when you go home or if you go to the bathroom.

Interference with coping strategies

Many people learn to rely on using coping strategies to manage the effects of their brain injury on a day-to-day basis. Drinking alcohol might interfere with their ability to use these coping strategies. For example, after drinking alcohol a brain injury survivor with problems managing their anger might no longer be able to employ strategies such as breathing deeply and removing themselves from the situation to cope with their rising anger. They might have an anger outburst, possibly putting themselves or others around them at risk of harm.

Seizures

Heavy alcohol consumption has been found to cause seizures in some people. Seizures can also be experienced following sudden withdrawal from regular alcohol use. This happens because the brain attempts to restore balance to its delicate chemical processes but ends up overcompensating. It is therefore very important for people to get professional support when attempting overcome alcohol dependence.

Alcohol can also lower the threshold for seizures in people who have developed post-traumatic epilepsy. More information on this, as well as a quick guide for what to do if someone has a seizure is available in our publication [*Epilepsy after brain injury*](#).

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Mood disorders

Some people use alcohol to cope with mood disorders such as depression and anxiety, as alcohol can have a temporary relaxing effect. However, long-term use of alcohol has been found to cause mood disorders to develop and worsen existing mood disorders.

Unfortunately, mood disorders such as depression and anxiety can develop after brain injury for a number of reasons. Alcohol may therefore worsen these experiences in brain injury survivors.

In some cases, a brain injury survivor with depression or anxiety may be drinking on their own, so you might not be aware of their drinking behaviour. If you are concerned about them being withdrawn, unsociable, tearful or irritable and you suspect they might be depressed, reach out to them to offer emotional support, or suggest following the guidance in our publication [Depression after brain injury](#).

Alcohol might also interact negatively with any mood disorder medication that a brain injury survivor is taking. It is always extremely important for the survivor to check medication information sheets/ labels before drinking alcohol.

Tips for helping brain injury survivors with managing alcohol

Due to the possible complications of drinking alcohol described in the previous section, it is generally advised that brain injury survivors do not drink alcohol. In this section we offer some tips of how you can help brain injury survivors to reduce or stop drinking alcohol.

Limit your own alcohol intake

- The best way to support a brain injury survivor with reducing or stopping their drinking is to limit your own drinking as well. If drinking is an activity that you enjoyed together, try to find new activities to do. For example, instead of drinking a glass of wine together at the end of a busy week, consider having a special hot chocolate, coffee or tea instead.

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- Find alcohol-free versions of drinks that the brain injury might enjoy and that you can enjoy together. You might be able to find some with tastes that are similar to alcoholic beverages that the survivor enjoys, such as alcohol-free beers, ciders or 'mocktails'.

Try to understand why the brain injury survivor drinks alcohol

- Ask the brain injury survivor to reflect on why they drink alcohol. Some suggestions of this are available in our publication [*Alcohol after brain injury*](#). Understanding the reasons why someone drinks alcohol can help with finding ways to stop or reduce drinking. For example, if the survivor is drinking because they are struggling to cope with the impact of brain injury, you could offer them emotional support or encourage them to get support from their GP. You could also gently remind them that drinking might be counterproductive as it might worsen some of the effects of brain injury or interfere with their ability to use coping strategies.
- If others around a brain injury survivor are drinking alcohol, they might feel more pressured to drink as well. Ask them if this is the case and reassure them that it is okay for them not to drink.
- Some brain injury survivors might drink simply because it is available to them in the house! Try to avoid buying alcohol, or discourage the brain injury survivor from buying alcohol, so that it is not readily available to them. You could also encourage the survivor to avoid environments where alcohol is available such as pubs or bars.
- Encourage the brain injury survivor to find new activities to do so that they do not begin drinking out of boredom.

Communicate with the brain injury survivor and others

- Offer uninterrupted time to the brain injury survivor to generally ask about how they are feeling and how you can support them
- Try to avoid using blame language or unhelpful remarks such as labelling

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the survivor 'an alcoholic' or saying 'you drink too much'. Instead, try to use assertive language, such as reminding them that you can still have a good time without needing to drink.

- Don't be afraid to repeat conversations several times or to provide reminders if this would be helpful to the brain injury survivor. For instance, you might have already had a conversation with the survivor about not drinking alcohol before going out, but they might need another reminder while you are out, for example if they have problems with memory.
- Encourage others in the brain injury survivor's life to not drink around the survivor so that they feel better supported. For instance, you could have an alcohol-free get together with friends, or choose activities to do together that do not involve drinking alcohol.
- Encourage the brain injury survivor to read our publication [Alcohol after brain injury](#) so that they can better understand the impact that alcohol might have on them after their injury.
- Remind the brain injury survivor that you are discouraging them from drinking alcohol because you care for them, not because you want to spoil their fun or activities
- If helpful, provide positive feedback and encouragement to the brain injury survivor whenever they choose not to drink

Keep yourself and the brain injury survivor safe

- Be aware that alcohol can worsen some of the effects of brain injury, thereby putting brain injury survivors at risk of accidents. Further information on this is available in our publication [Alcohol after brain injury](#). Consider staying with a survivor if they have drunk alcohol to keep them safe.
- Never let a brain injury survivor drink and drive, and never drink and drive yourself.
- If the brain injury survivor has difficulties with managing their anger or

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behavioural issues that worsen after drinking alcohol and you are at risk of harm, try to remove yourself from the situation and keep yourself safe. Contact emergency services if you are in danger or you are concerned for the survivor's safety.

Monitor drinking behaviour

- Help the brain injury survivor by keeping an eye on how many drinks they have had and discouraging them from having more than one drink or mixing drinks. You should also encourage them to eat before drinking and drink water between alcohol drinks.
- Encourage the brain injury survivor to keep a 'drink diary', and offer to help with this if you are drinking together. This way you can encourage the survivor to produce a visual record of how much they drink, which can help with monitoring how much they can tolerate as well as how drinking alcohol has made them feel. There are several apps and tools that are designed to help people with tracking how much they drink, which you might wish to explore with the survivor.

Summary

Sustaining a brain injury can reduce a survivor's tolerance to alcohol, but they might continue to drink and consequently experience worsened effects or other complications. This can leave you feeling concerned, and we hope that some of the tips in this publication can help you to approach and discuss this with the survivor.

To further discuss any of the issues in this publication, or to get support, contact the Headway helpline on 0808 800 2244 or helpline@headway.org.uk (Monday - Friday, 9am - 5pm).

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Useful organisations

The following organisations can provide information, support or guidance on managing alcohol addiction, although do note that they may not be specialised in supporting people with brain injury, and advice may therefore need to be more carefully tailored to your personal circumstances.

Drink Aware

Web: www.drinkaware.co.uk

Drinkline: 0300 123 1110

Email: contact@drinkaware.co.uk

Adfam

Web: www.adfam.org.uk

Tel (for general enquiries): 07442 137 421

Email: admin@adfam.org.uk

Al-Anon Family Groups

Web: www.al-anonuk.org.uk

Tel: 0800 0086 811

Email: helpline@al-anonuk.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous

Web: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Tel: 0800 9177 650

Email: help@aamail.org

This publication received a Highly Commended award at the British Medical Association Patient Information Awards 2019.

As a charity, we rely on donations from people like you to continue being able to provide free information to those affected by brain injury. To donate, or find out how else you can get involved with supporting our

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