



## Alcohol after brain injury

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**Acknowledgements:** Many thanks to the brain injury survivors who kindly contributed to this publication by sharing their experiences of alcohol after brain injury. Thank you as well to Dr Anya Topiwala, Senior Clinical Researcher and Consultant Psychiatrist at Oxford Health NHSFT, and Dr Subha Vandabona, Consultant in Rehabilitation Medicine at Leicester General Hospital for their support with the development of this publication.

### 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, and 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.

This publication has been written to offer guidance on the consumption of alcohol after brain injury. It explains how alcohol affects the brain and why it is therefore advisable to stop drinking alcohol after a brain injury. Tips for reducing alcohol consumption are provided as well as sources of further information and support.

**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](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk) on 0300 123 1110.**

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





## Why do people drink alcohol?

Many people choose to drink alcohol as part of their lifestyle. Some of the reasons are as follows:

- **Alongside a meal** - some people enjoy alcohol as a complimentary flavour alongside their meal, such as drinking a glass of wine with dinner
- **To relax** - some people enjoy drinking alcohol to relax, for example at the end of a busy day
- **Socialising** - many people drink alcohol while socialising, for instance drinking beer at a local pub or on a night out
- **Culture** - some people drink alcohol as part of their culture or during cultural celebrations, such as during New Year's Eve
- **Pressure** - some people may feel pressured by others around them to drink alcohol, for example if they are out with their friends who are all drinking and they do not want to feel 'left out'
- **Coping mechanism** - some people turn to drinking alcohol as a coping mechanism for negative things going on in their life. In this situation there is a danger that their drinking becomes an addiction, which can cause various problems in their life.

Brain injury survivors may find themselves in any of the above situations and therefore find themselves faced with the question of whether or not to drink alcohol after their injury.

## How does alcohol affect the brain?

Alcohol is classified as a depressant drug, despite being legal (for over 18s), widely available and a large part of UK culture.

Being a depressant drug means that it has a dampening effect on a number of skills that the brain is responsible for by affecting the delicate balance of chemical processes in the brain. This decreases the brain's ability to process things such as attention, memory, mood and mobility efficiently. After drinking, it can become harder for the person to walk, talk, make decisions and remember information for several hours after the alcohol has been consumed.

A part of the brain called the prefrontal cortex has been found to be negatively impacted by alcohol consumption. This part of the brain is responsible for making decisions, regulating emotions, monitoring behaviour and processing information.



## Drinking alcohol after brain injury

Research has found that in the first year after brain injury, many brain injury survivors give up drinking alcohol altogether. There are several suggested reasons for this, such as:

- Spending time in a setting where alcohol is not accessible (such as a hospital or rehabilitation unit)
- Being advised against drinking alcohol by therapists
- Being more focused on rebuilding skills and life after brain injury
- Having one drink and realising that they are more sensitive to the effects of alcohol, therefore intentionally choosing to stop drinking
- Being on medication that they cannot drink alcohol with

For some people, alcohol drinking may resume once the brain injury survivor is back at home and returning to their regular life.

Some survivors may only have a drink on occasion, for example at social gatherings; we hope that the information provided later in this publication can guide readers to doing so responsibly.

Some survivors may drink alcohol more regularly and become dependent on this. It is thought that people who were heavy drinkers or had depression/ mental health issues before their brain injury, are more likely to become heavy drinkers afterwards, even if they do have a period of no drinking in the early days of their injury. Information about getting support for alcohol addiction is available in the section *Professional support*.

## Complications of alcohol and brain injury

There can be a number of complications to drinking alcohol after brain injury. These are covered in some detail 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.

Brain injury survivors must consider this increased sensitivity to alcohol as it could have serious implications for situations such as crossing the road. **Do not drink and drive**,



as it can be impossible to know how a brain injury has affected your ability to drink and stay under the legal limit. Further guidance about drink driving is available at [www.met.police.uk](http://www.met.police.uk).

As well as increased sensitivity, there are a number of other possible complications of drinking alcohol after brain injury, covered below.

### **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. Effects of brain injury that are worsened under the influence of alcohol might put the brain injury survivor in risky situations, such as worsened memory problems causing the survivor to forget how to get home.

### **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 the 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 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 to get professional support when attempting to overcome alcohol dependence. More information on this is available in the section *Professional support*.

Alcohol can also lower the threshold for seizures in people who have developed post-traumatic epilepsy.

### **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



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 - for more information on this, see our publications [Depression after brain injury](#) and [Anxiety after brain injury](#). Alcohol may therefore worsen these experiences in brain injury survivors.

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

## Tips for managing alcohol use after brain injury

Many people willingly choose to give up drinking alcohol after their brain injury. Others may find it difficult to give up drinking, in which case we hope that the following tips are helpful. Many of these have been suggested by brain injury survivors themselves.

- **Explore non-alcoholic drinks** - non-alcoholic drink options are widely available. Non-alcoholic sparkling drinks or juices might be a good substitute, while many places now serve non-alcoholic beers, ciders or 'mocktails'.
- **Identify why you like to drink** - consider reflecting on the list provided on page 2 of this publication of the reasons why people drink. Being able to identify why you drink might help you to identify alternative strategies. For example, if you enjoy a quiet drink at the end of a busy day, find an alternative non-alcoholic drink to enjoy at this time. Or if you are using alcohol as a coping mechanism, consider getting professional support for the issues that you are struggling with.
- **Educate others around you** - consider sharing information from this publication with others to help with removing any social pressures to drink. Many people assume that once a brain injury survivor has returned home from hospital, they are ready to resume life 'as normal', especially when physical injuries have healed. Educating people about the effects and impact of brain injury can help in situations where others may be offering or expecting you to drink alcohol.
- **Ask others to support you** - ask friends and others in your life to support you by offering non-alcoholic drinks when you visit, stopping drinking themselves or not drinking around you. Find new activities to enjoy together that do not involve drinking alcohol.
- **Stay assertive** - even if people in your life do not support you with not drinking, try to stay assertive about your decision, as ultimately you know best about your brain injury and how you might feel if you give into pressure.





- **Limit yourself** - if you do decide to drink, limit yourself to one or two drinks a night. Ask family and friends around you to help with keeping track of this and to encourage you to stop.
- **Make travel arrangements** - never drive after drinking, even if you think you are below the national alcohol limit. Remember that your brain will be more sensitive to the effects of alcohol, even if you think you have stayed within the legal drinking limit. Make travel arrangements in advance for example getting a lift home from someone you trust or sharing a taxi with a friend.
- **Drink sensibly** - if you do decide to drink, stick to one type of alcoholic drink rather than mixing drinks, and eat some food before you start. Food slows down the rate of alcohol absorption by lining the stomach. Meals containing healthy fats, such as fish, can be particularly good at slowing down alcohol absorption rates. Drink slowly, pace yourself, and drink glasses of water in between.
- **Get professional support** - see the next section of this publication for details about getting professional support for alcohol after brain injury. Remember that you can also get general information and support from Headway's nurse-led helpline on 0808 800 2244 (Monday - Friday, 9am-5pm) or [helpline@headway.org.uk](mailto:helpline@headway.org.uk), or from Headway's online communities. For more information on how Headway can support you, visit [www.headway.org.uk/supporting-you](http://www.headway.org.uk/supporting-you).
- **Don't drink alone** - avoid drinking on your own, as it can be difficult to keep track of how many drinks you have had and can cause you to feel even worse. Have people around you so that they can offer support if needed.
- **Keep a 'drink diary'** - this way you can produce a visual record of how much you drink, which can help with monitoring how much you can tolerate as well as how drinking alcohol has made you 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.

## Professional support

Some brain injury survivors might develop problems with alcohol dependence, or may fail to understand the impact that drinking alcohol has on them if they have problems with insight (for more information on this, see our publication [Insight and awareness after brain injury](#)). In such cases, it might be necessary to get professional support.

If you are not sure whether you need professional support, you can take a simple online test on Drink Aware's website at [www.drinkaware.co.uk/selfassessment](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk/selfassessment). This test will assess your drinking behaviour and give you information about whether you should seek



professional support. Do note however that the assessment does not factor a brain injury in, so you might still need to get expert input or contact the Drinkline helpline at 0300 123 1100.

If it is the impact of brain injury that is causing you to drink alcohol (for example, drinking because you are struggling to adjust to life after brain injury, or because your relationships have been negatively impacted by brain injury), you might benefit from getting general support from a clinical neuropsychologist. These are experts who can support brain injury survivors with the cognitive, emotional and behavioural effects of brain injury. Discuss getting a referral to a clinical neuropsychologist with your GP, or search online for private neuropsychologists in your area.

Research has found that group-based and individual counselling sessions are effective methods of supporting brain injury survivors with alcohol addiction issues. You could therefore consider speaking to your GP about getting some support from a counsellor or a psychologist who may specialise in alcohol or substance addictions.

There are a number of organisations that have been set up to support people with alcohol addiction issues. Whilst these services can provide helpful information and support, it is important to remember that many will not be experienced in supporting people specifically with a brain injury. For more information, see the section Useful organisations.

There may also be local alcohol addiction services in your local area that can help. You can search for this on the NHS' services directory at [www.nhs.uk/service-search/Alcoholaddiction/LocationSearch/1805](http://www.nhs.uk/service-search/Alcoholaddiction/LocationSearch/1805).

## 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](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk)

Drinkline: 0300 123 1110

Email: [contact@drinkaware.co.uk](mailto:contact@drinkaware.co.uk)

### Adfam

Web: [www.adfam.org.uk](http://www.adfam.org.uk)

Tel (for general enquiries): 07442 137 421

Email: [admin@adfam.org.uk](mailto:admin@adfam.org.uk)



## **Al-Anon Family Groups**

Web: [www.al-anonuk.org.uk](http://www.al-anonuk.org.uk)

Tel: 0800 0086 811

Email: [helpline@al-anonuk.org.uk](mailto:helpline@al-anonuk.org.uk)

## **Alcoholics Anonymous**

Web: [www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)

Tel: 0800 9177 650

Email: [help@aamail.org](mailto:help@aamail.org)

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Last reviewed 2023. Next review 2025.