

# Alcohol and accidents

Alcohol is one of the leading causes of accidents, leading to many injuries and deaths.

Because alcohol is a depressant, it slows down the brain and affects the body's responses.

Drinking alcohol:

- affects our judgement and reasoning
- slows down our reactions
- upsets our sense of balance and coordination
- impairs our vision and hearing
- makes us lose concentration
- makes us drowsy.

People who have been drinking are more likely to take risks, further increasing the likelihood of accidents.<sup>(1)</sup>

Accident victims who have been drinking suffer more serious injuries than those who haven't<sup>(2)</sup>. Alcohol may also hinder recovery from injury, as it affects a number of the body's responses, including circulation and the immune system.<sup>(3)</sup>

People who have had an accident while drunk may be less likely to seek medical help. It's also harder for doctors to diagnose serious conditions like head injuries when a patient is drunk. Alcohol can interfere with anaesthetic and other medication, meaning operations and treatment may need to be delayed.<sup>(4)</sup>

## FACTS and FIGURES

If you have been drinking, your risk of accidents is increased in two ways – firstly, the likelihood of you having an accident is increased, and secondly, if you are injured, the seriousness of your injury is likely to be greater than if you were sober.

Around 40% of patients admitted to Accident and Emergency departments (A&E) are diagnosed with alcohol-related injuries or illnesses.<sup>(5)</sup>

Younger people are more likely to have an alcohol related accident than older people. For example, in people younger than 65 years old, 22% of male falls and 14% of female falls were attributable to alcohol, compared to 12% and 4% of falls among male and females aged over 65 years, respectively.<sup>(6)</sup>

If you drink, you'll know that minor accidents happen all the time. Alcohol upsets our sense of balance and co-ordination. So on a night out, maybe you find yourself bumping into things more often, or tripping up your front steps on your way home. But alcohol is also the cause of more serious accidents too.

### Traffic accidents

Although drink driving figures have been falling steadily for decades, traffic accidents are still a leading cause of alcohol related deaths among young men aged 16-24.<sup>(7)</sup>

**460 deaths** were caused by drivers over the legal alcohol limit in 2007 (incidentally, the lowest figure since records began). There were a further **1,760 serious casualties** and **12,260 slight casualties**. Further accidents are caused by drivers who have

drunk alcohol but are not over the limit. Alcohol is a factor in **one in five road deaths** (figures include drunk pedestrians).<sup>(8)</sup>

### Domestic accidents

It may be your refuge from the world, but accidents in the home are extremely common. And alcohol is the biggest single cause of accidents in the home.<sup>(9)</sup> Every year, there are around **4,000 fatal domestic accidents, 2.6 million accidents that require treatment in A&E departments** and millions more minor accidents. At a conservative estimate, there are **400 deaths** in alcohol-related home accidents.<sup>(10)</sup>

### Fires

There is also a strong link between drinking alcohol and being injured in a fire. Around **one in three fires** are caused by people under the influence of alcohol. Of the 270 people who died in household fires in 2007/08, around a third had been drinking.<sup>(11, 12)</sup> Two-thirds of people who are admitted to hospital or die from burns have been drinking alcohol.<sup>(13)</sup>

### Drownings

It may seem like a great idea to go for a swim when you've been drinking. After all, a nice cooling dip is a tempting prospect on a hot day or after a night out. But **between a quarter and half of all adult drowning victims** have alcohol in their bloodstream.<sup>(14)</sup> Alcohol is present in around a third to two-thirds of people who drown in swimming and boating accidents.<sup>(15)</sup> Alcohol is also a factor in around **one in eight domestic drownings**, with falling into a garden pond, slipping in the bath and falling asleep in the bath among the most common causes.<sup>(16)</sup>

## Workplace accidents

Drinking and the workplace are rarely a good mix. And when it comes to safety, it's an especially bad idea to mix the two. Alcohol is a factor in up to **one in four workplace accidents**<sup>(17)</sup>. Heavy drinkers are two to three times more likely to be involved in industrial accidents than non-problem drinkers.<sup>(18)</sup>

## PROGRESSION

As blood alcohol concentration (BAC) rises, so does the risk of accidents. BAC is measured in mg of alcohol per 100ml of blood, or mg%. The current drink-drive limit in the UK is 80mg%.

With a BAC of 30mg%:

- judgment, coordination and sensory perception are impaired
- reaction time slows
- performance in intellectual tests falls
- eyesight is weakened

These impairments get worse the higher your BAC becomes. Euphoria also sets in, leading you to overestimate your own abilities and behave recklessly.

With a BAC of 80mg%, **you are five times more likely to have a driving accident** than before drinking.

With a BAC of 120mg%, **you are 10 times more likely to have a driving accident.**<sup>(19)</sup>

Even after alcohol has left your bloodstream, the risk of accidents remains heightened. In one study, airline pilots performed routine tasks in a simulator:

- Before drinking any alcohol, one in 10 could not perform all the tasks correctly
- With a BAC of 100mg%, nine out of 10 could not perform all the tasks correctly
- After 14 hours, when all the alcohol had left their system, two-thirds still could not perform all the tasks correctly<sup>(20)</sup>

## ADVICE and GETTING HELP

If you have been drinking, do not drive, operate machinery, swim or take unnecessary risks. Look out for friends who may be behaving recklessly. Remember that your performance and judgement could still be affected by alcohol the day after a heavy drinking session.

If you are at the scene of an accident, call the emergency services as soon as possible.

There are also some simple first aid measures you can take after you have called for help. If the casualty is unconscious, first open and maintain their airway. If their throat becomes blocked with vomit, or their tongue, they can choke and stop breathing.

If the casualty is breathing, place them in the recovery position. If they are not breathing, you can perform chest compressions and rescue breaths.

If someone is bleeding, apply pressure to the wound using a clean cloth or piece of clothing. If the casualty is in shock, lay them down, and raise and support the injured limb.

If someone is burned or scalded, cool the affected area in cold running water for at least 10 minutes, then cover the wound with a clean, non fluffy cloth to prevent infection.

For more information on first aid courses in your area contact the St John Ambulance on 08700 10 49 50 or via their website, [www.sja.org.uk](http://www.sja.org.uk)

If you are concerned about your drinking or someone else's, contact Drinkline, the national 24-hour helpline, on 0800 917 8282.

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