



# Alcohol and You

## Facts Tips Support

Helping you make safer choices



Teenage drinking is at its lowest level for thirty years and currently in Great Britain, 78% of 16–24 year-olds choose to go out and have a good time without getting drunk. But the truth is that young people are more likely to go home alone or with a stranger, embarrass themselves or their mates, be assaulted or injured, or harm someone else if they get drunk or lose control.

This guide gives you tips on how to stay safe and drink responsibly if you choose to drink, plus advice on what to do and where to go for help and support if things go wrong.

- o 60% of 11 to 15 year-olds have chosen not to try alcohol at all.
- o The average age at which young people start drinking is rising.
- o Alcohol-related hospital admissions for under 18s are falling.
- o 85% of young adults aged 16–24 in either don't drink alcohol or drink within the government's low risk guidelines. Binge drinking in this age group is also decreasing.

This guide is written and produced by The TALK ABOUT Trust, [talkabouttrust.org](http://talkabouttrust.org).

If you require further information please email: [info@talkabouttrust.org](mailto:info@talkabouttrust.org).

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## Top Tips

Alcohol can change how most people act, feel and behave, but because it affects the brain and organs of young people more than adults, they are particularly vulnerable.

We've put together some tips to help older teenagers and young adults stay safer and in control if they choose to drink alcohol.



### EAT

Eating before or while drinking means that any alcohol stays in the stomach for longer, giving the liver more of a chance to break it down. On an empty stomach, alcohol rushes into the bloodstream and organs. Eating toast, or a bowl of cereal will do, but a proper meal is best!

### HYDRATE

Alcohol is dehydrating, so refreshing alcohol-free drinks make a big difference, especially if you're dancing and using energy! Having a big drink of water when you get back home is a good tip too. If you play a lot of sport, be mindful of the effects of alcohol on your performance.

### PACE

One great way to enjoy a better night out while saving money is to alternate alcoholic drinks with alcohol-free ones or water. Avoiding drinking too much too quickly also really helps, as this stops alcohol from rushing into the bloodstream and toxins from building up. All bars and clubs have to offer free tap water, so don't be afraid to ask.







## GOOD MATES

Look out for each other – watch each other’s drinks to reduce drink spiking risk, look after anyone who has drunk too much and make sure they get home safely as well. Drink spiking is on the increase, and not always by strangers. It is estimated that 1 in 10 under 25s have been a victim of spiking.

## PLAN

Working out a plan on how to get home before heading out is a wise move, such as arranging a lift with a non-drinking mate, booking a cab and keeping enough money aside, or checking public transport times. For anyone walking home, avoiding unlit or unsafe areas and not walking alone are key to arriving back safely. Charging your phone fully before going out, and letting someone know where you are going and who you are with, is also important. Recent polls show that over 30% of students have taken risks after a night out either by going home on their own or with a stranger. Don’t risk it!

## DON’T MIX

Combining alcohol with other drugs, prescription or illegal, can be very dangerous. For example, alcohol is a depressant, so it slows down the nervous system, as does cannabis. Their combined effects can interact and cause more negative consequences when taken together, increasing the depressant effects of both. Judgement, reaction time and coordination are affected more.

Cannabis affects basic control functions in the brain, such as nausea and vomiting, and can suppress the body’s response to vomit after drinking too much. This could mean an increased risk of alcohol poisoning.

If driving, all it takes is 40 mg of alcohol per 100 ml of blood (a blood alcohol content (BAC) of 0.04) and a single joint to feel the effects equivalent to a blood alcohol content of over 0.08, i.e. above the legal limit for driving.

88% of young people in treatment for

## KNOW YOUR LIMITS

The amount of alcohol in different drinks can vary a lot, so check the back label to find the alcohol content of your drink. Beers and ciders mainly range between 0 and 9% and wines from 0 to 14%. Each shot of vodka is a unit, the same as a half pint of 4% beer and there are up to 28 units in a 70cl bottle of spirits, the same as three bottles of wine.



1 UK Unit

Per 25ml



28 UK Units

The UK Chief Medical Officers recommend adults do not regularly drink more than 14 units per week.

[drinkaware.co.uk](http://drinkaware.co.uk)



If making self-served drinks like cocktails, they'll often be stronger than bought ones, so a good tip is to use a measure, have a long mixer and plenty of ice. Also, watch out for 'top ups' – anyone can kid themselves that they're still on the same drink – finishing a glass first before having another drink helps.

You can access a unit calculator that adds up your drinks and calories at [drinkaware.co.uk/understand-your-drinking/unit-calculator](http://drinkaware.co.uk/understand-your-drinking/unit-calculator). There are also apps to download that help track how much you drink.

Find out more at [talkaboutalcohol.com](http://talkaboutalcohol.com)

### HOW MANY UNITS IN A DRINK?

Water or a soft drink



= 0 units

Small alcopop or 1/2 a pint of beer



= 1 unit

A pint of beer or a medium glass of wine (175ml)



= 2 units

A large glass of wine (250ml) or a can of strong lager



= 3 units

## EXCUSES

There's a great range of low and no alcohol drinks available now from shops, pubs and bars for anyone who doesn't want to drink alcohol or for those who feel they've had enough. No one can tell the difference.

If someone wants to go out but not drink, they could also offer to be the designated driver.



# How much is too much?

## UNITS & DAILY GUIDELINES

How alcohol affects a person depends on their age, size, sex and health. Women are generally smaller than men and have less body water; also they have less of the enzyme which breaks down alcohol.

How quickly someone drinks and whether they are eating also affects how alcohol is absorbed by the body, but in general, the liver can break down one unit (approximately ½ pint, one shot or half a glass of wine) an hour.

The **UK Low Risk Drinking Guidelines** for adults say that men and women should not regularly drink more than 14 units a week, that's about 7 pints of beer or cider, 6 glasses of wine or 7 double vodkas. It's best to spread this over a few days and not to save up units and drink heavily at weekends.

Binge drinking (e.g., four or more drinks in quick succession) can lead to long term health problems and increases the chances of injury, assault and theft. If someone drinks too much, 48 hours without alcohol gives the liver a chance to recover. The guidelines are based on medical evidence showing that we don't increase our risk of alcohol-related illness or disease (by more than 1%) if we drink within these limits.

N.B. There is no safe level of drinking for under 18s as the brain and liver aren't fully developed and toxins from the breakdown of alcohol have a much greater effect on immature bodies. That is why the Chief Medical Officer recommends that an alcohol-free childhood to at least the age of 15 is best and why there are laws in place to restrict the sale and purchase of alcohol to under 18s.

### WHAT DOES 14 UNITS LOOK LIKE?

A pint of beer, lager or cider at 4% abv



A 50ml measure (double) of spirits at 40% abv



A 330ml bottle of beer, lager or cider at 5% (1.7 units)



A 125ml glass of sparkling wine at 11% (1.4 units)



A 175ml glass of wine @ 12% abv (2.1 units)








### WHEN NOT TO DRINK

- If planning to drive.
- If operating machinery, electrical equipment or working at heights.
- Before playing aerobic sport - alcohol is dehydrating.
- When on certain medications - ask the doctor if unsure.
- When pregnant, as alcohol crosses the placenta directly to the baby.

For more information visit [talkaboutalcohol.com](http://talkaboutalcohol.com)

### 14 UNITS SPREAD OVER A WEEK WITH DRINK-FREE DAYS

Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
			-			-

# The law and underage drinking

## Consuming alcohol in licensed premises

It is against the law for someone who is under 18 to consume alcohol in a licensed premise, with the exception of 16 and 17 year-olds, who are allowed to drink beer, wine or cider during a meal with adults (but they may not buy the alcohol themselves).

## Alcohol restriction zones

It is an arrestable offence to fail to comply with a police officer's request not to drink alcohol in a designated Alcohol Restricted Area. The police also have the power to take away and dispose of any alcohol and containers in the person's possession.

## Buying alcohol for someone else

Police have the power to charge anyone over 18 who knowingly buys alcohol for someone under 18 (buying by proxy).



## Buying alcohol for yourself

It is illegal for licensed premises to sell alcohol to someone under 18. It is illegal to sell alcohol to a person who is drunk.

## No ID, no sale

Even if someone is over 18, shopkeepers and licensed premises can refuse to serve them if they don't have ID and look younger.

## Underage drinking in public places

Police have powers to confiscate alcohol from under 18s drinking in public spaces (e.g. on the street or in parks).

## Drinking and driving

It's against the law for an adult to drive with more than 80mg of alcohol per 100ml of their blood (or more than 50mg of alcohol per 100ml in Scotland). If they break the law, they could face a fine of £5,000, six months in prison and having their licence taken away for at least a year. Causing death by careless driving when under the influence of drink can result in an unlimited fine, a ban from driving for at least 5 years or even life imprisonment.

For more information, visit [think.gov.uk/road-safety-laws/](https://www.think.gov.uk/road-safety-laws/)

# How too much alcohol affects the body

## Brain

Too much alcohol acts as a depressant on the brain, the control centre of the body. It can make the drinker feel happy for a little while, but any improvement in mood is temporary and people usually feel worse after drinking too much. Alcohol can depress the central nervous system leading to slurred speech, unsteady movement, disturbed perceptions, and an inability to react quickly. Long-term drinking can kill off brain cells and lead to memory loss and mental problems as well as alcohol dependency.

## Head

After a few drinks, behaviour changes. The person drinking may feel more relaxed, emotional and uninhibited, but they also lose control. Their judgement is affected too. They might make a fool of themselves, get into trouble, cause an accident or do something they regret later. Every year, 18-22% of accidental deaths are alcohol-related. Alcohol draws water out of the brain. So, as the body starts to break down alcohol, the drinker may feel dizzy and be in for a throbbing headache if they drink too much.

## Heart

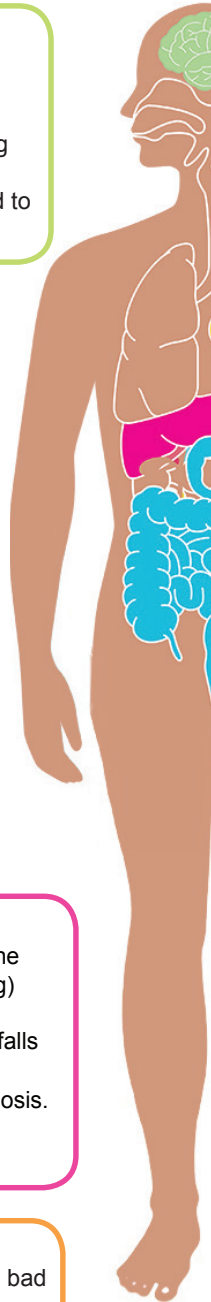
Drinking large quantities of alcohol over a short period can cause irregular heart beats and shortness of breath, leading to panic attacks and illness. Moderate drinking, that is 1 or 2 units a day, may offer some protection from heart disease in men over 40 and in post-menopausal women, but it is not advised that an adult takes up drinking if they don't already. It is more important to be physically active, eat a healthy, balanced diet and to avoid smoking.

## Liver

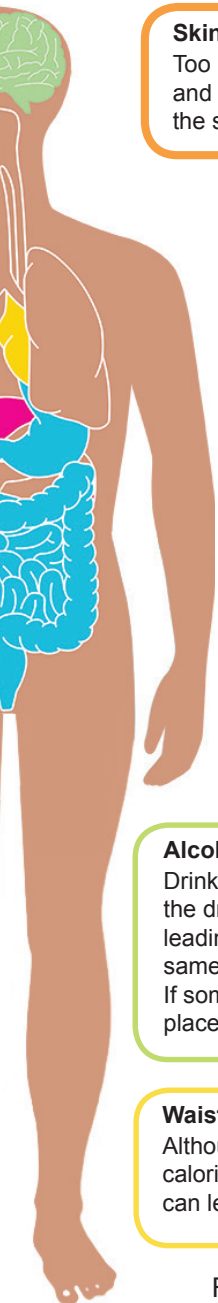
The liver breaks down most of the alcohol a person drinks (the rest leaves the body in breath, urine and sweat). But it can only break down about 1 unit (8g) of alcohol an hour in an average adult. More than that, and it stops working properly. If the body can't cope with all the alcohol in its system, the person falls into an alcoholic coma (which can be fatal). Long-term heavy drinking kills off liver cells, leading to a disease called cirrhosis. It's a 'silent' disease – symptoms may not be noticeable until the disease is advanced. Long-term excessive drinking can also lead to liver cancer.

## Armpits

Excess alcohol is also excreted as smelly body odour and bad breath - not great for attracting partners.







### **Skin**

Too much alcohol dehydrates the body, which is bad news for the skin and complexion. It also dilates the blood vessels under the surface of the skin, leading to ugly veins on the nose and cheeks.

### **Eyes**

Too much alcohol dilates blood vessels in the eyes, so they can look red and bloodshot. It also affects the signals sent from the eyes to the brain - vision becomes blurred, and distances and speeds get harder to judge. Many road accidents involve drivers or pedestrians who have alcohol in their blood.

Too much alcohol also suppresses REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep. It's the most important phase of sleep so drinking heavily can ruin the chance of a good night's rest.

### **Gut**

Alcohol is absorbed from the stomach into the bloodstream. The body's ability to process alcohol depends on various things, like age, weight and sex. Alcohol breaks down in the body at a rate of roughly one unit per hour and therefore drinking more than one unit of alcohol an hour will build up the blood alcohol content (BAC) and it may be many hours before it is safe to drive. After a night of heavy drinking a person risks being over the drink drive limit the next morning. Learn more at [morning-after.org.uk](http://morning-after.org.uk)

### **Alcohol and sex**

Drinking too much alcohol can affect performance in the bedroom because the drinker is not fully in control of their body. Alcohol affects judgement too, leading to unsafe sex. 40% of 16-24 year-old girls and 31% of boys of the same age group reported having had unprotected sex after binge drinking. If someone is pregnant, they shouldn't drink because alcohol crosses the placenta directly to the baby and can cause Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

### **Waist**

Although alcohol is fat free, it is very calorific (only fat contains more calories per gram) and increases your appetite, so excess drinking can lead to weight gain.

For more information, please visit  
[talkaboutalcohol.com/interactive-body/](http://talkaboutalcohol.com/interactive-body/)

# Party survival guide



## A NIGHT OUT

- Plan how to get home before going out. Have numbers for taxis, or pre book and keep aside enough money to get home safely.
- Eat before going out, or during the evening.
- If drinking/ pre-drinking watch how much is drunk, especially if sharing a bottle. Each shot of spirit is a unit, a can of beer is 2 units on average. Wine is 2 units or more a glass.
- Avoid getting involved in a round or limit rounds to 2 or 3 friends, otherwise it gets very expensive and people feel pressured to drink larger quantities and more quickly.
- Drink water and non-alcoholic drinks regularly to stay refreshed and hydrated - bars have to offer free tap water.
- Look out for friends and make sure they look out for you.

## DRINK SPIKING

Drink spiking can include adding:

- alcohol into a non-alcoholic drink or extra alcohol to an alcoholic drink
- prescription or illegal drugs into an alcoholic or non-alcoholic drink.

## To help prevent drink spiking

- Party with trusted friends. Discuss how you will watch out for each other while at the venue.
- Buy your own drinks. Watch the bartender prepare your drink.
- Avoid drinking too much alcohol, especially in unfamiliar situations - It could increase the likelihood of risk taking and make you less aware of danger.
- Don't accept any drinks from strangers.
- Accompany the person to the bar if you do wish to accept the offer of a drink from a stranger and take the drink from the bartender yourself.
- Be wary if a stranger buys you a drink and it's not the type of drink you requested.
- Don't take your eyes off your drink. If you have to leave the table (to go to the toilet, for example) ask a friend to watch over the drinks.
- Buy drinks that come in bottles with screw-top lids. Carry the bottle in your bag when you go to the toilet or dance.
- Don't consume your drink if you think it may have been spiked. Discuss your concerns with the manager or host.
- Tell the manager or host immediately if you see someone spike a drink or if you suspect that drink spiking may be occurring.

From our poll of nearly 1,000 young people in October 2021, 16% age 16 – 25 year olds women and 8% young men and 17% non binary said their drink had been spiked ..... 91% had not reported the fact to the police or GP.

For more information on drink spiking and what to do if your drink is spiked, visit [life-stuff.org](https://www.life-stuff.org)



## SAFER HOLIDAYS

If going away for sun, sea and fun or adventure remembering these simple tips for anyone choosing to drink alcohol will make for a better trip:

- If travelling by air, especially on long flights avoid being tempted to drink too much as both alcohol and altitude are dehydrating. Airlines can also refuse to take passengers who are drunk.
- Because alcohol is dehydrating, and the heat of the sun makes it worse, drink at least a litre of water a day.
- Don't let drink lead anyone into risky situations, with strangers, swimming pools or unknown places.
- Be aware that bars abroad often serve larger measures of spirits than at home so just two vodkas could be the same as four or five in the UK.
- When relaxing in a beer garden, on the beach, or at a BBQ, lather on the sun lotion. A combination of hangover and sunburn is enough to spoil anyone's holiday.
- In some countries, alcohol is restricted or banned (areas in Asia, India and Africa, for example). Checking before travelling, and respecting local laws and customs will help prevent any trouble.
- Be aware of the local area and where you can find help. Remember that drink spiking is a global problem.
- Many insurance companies won't pay up if someone has had an accident after drinking too much while abroad.
- Check drink drive limits if driving as they may be lower. Most of Europe has a standard BAC limit of 0.05, although in Sweden it is 0.02 and in Hungary zero. However, the majority of EU countries have lower limits specifically for novice drivers and in the US it is illegal to have any alcohol in the blood if driving and under the age of 21.
- Some countries have different legal drinking ages - in the US it's age 21. Again, checking before travelling is a good idea.



## FESTIVALS

Festivals are weird, as it feels like one big party where everyone knows and can trust each other – but, of course, they can't. People can end up in groups with complete strangers or much older people. This advice below can help everyone to have a great time and stay safer:

- Take a cheap pay as you go phone and a solar or wind up charger and leaving any expensive kit at home.
- Take plenty of sun cream, hats, wellies and a waterproof.
- Alcohol is dehydrating so if it's hot, keep up water intake and remembering the sun cream is key.
- Load up with as much light nutritious food as possible, like cereal bars, dried fruit and nuts. Frozen milk, cereal, bread, tinned tuna and frozen soft drinks really help save on high food and drink costs on site and keeps other stuff cool for a while. A trolley or fold up wheel barrow is great for this!
- Although it's a party atmosphere, resist the temptation to try things offered by 'new friends'.
- Stick with reliable friends, arranging regular meet up times during the day and evening.

## IS IT WORTH IT?

Just remember that people are far more likely to be involved in an accident, violence or to get in trouble with the police if they get drunk. Having a criminal record affects the chances of a good job and getting car insurance, and could result in not being allowed to travel to the US.

Even drinking to get drunk occasionally can have serious consequences. It affects judgement and can increase risky behaviour, which could result in:

- Injuries and accidents.
- Unsafe sex, which could result in sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies.
- Being robbed or going home with a stranger.
- Fights, arguments and relationship problems.
- Getting into trouble with the police and getting a criminal record.







## IF IT ALL GOES WRONG

Drinking very large amounts in one session can lead to acute alcohol poisoning.

If it all goes wrong, it's essential to get emergency help...

If someone loses consciousness after drinking too much, here's what to do:

- Keep them on their side with their head turned to the side (the recovery position).
- Make sure they're breathing and their mouth and airways are clear.
- If they stop breathing, start mouth to mouth resuscitation.
- Loosen any tight clothing that might restrict their breathing.
- Keep them warm (but not too hot) - with blankets or a coat.
- Call an ambulance but don't leave them... ask someone reliable to call the ambulance.

If someone vomits you should:

- Try to keep them sitting up. If they must lie down, make sure they're in the recovery position and that their mouth and airway are clear.

- If they begin to choke, get help immediately.
- Don't leave them, even if you can't bear the sight or smell of someone vomiting.

Alcohol poisoning is very dangerous. It can lead to a coma and, in extreme cases, death. The amount of alcohol it takes to cause alcohol poisoning depends on many factors, including size, weight, age and so on. Teenagers and inexperienced drinkers are particularly vulnerable.

Someone may have alcohol poisoning if:

- They are breathing less than twelve times a minute or stop breathing for periods of ten seconds or more.
- They're asleep and you can't wake them up.
- Their skin is cold, clammy, pale and bluish in colour.

**If you suspect someone has alcohol poisoning, treat it as a medical emergency - call an ambulance and stay with the person until help arrives.**

## TOP TIPS FOR THE MORNING AFTER

If you end up drinking more than you should, there are a few things you can do to ease the morning after.

- Drink as much water as you can before going to sleep, and put some beside the bed too.
- Take an antacid to settle your stomach.
- Alcohol is a depressant (slows down your reactions) so a coffee can perk you up, but can also dehydrate you, so keep up the water intake as well.
- Drinking alcohol lowers your blood sugar level, so eat as soon as you can. Bananas, cereal, or egg on toast are all good morning-after snacks.

- Never ever do 'hair of the dog' - you'll just prolong the agony.
- Have 48 hours without alcohol if it was a heavy session.
- And next time, follow our top tips for a great night out and you won't suffer again.



## What are the signs of problem drinking?

Although most adults drink socially and within the low risk guidelines, about 3% of people will face problems with alcohol dependency in their lifetime. Early signs to look out for are:

- Frequently drinking to the stage of passing out.
- Drinking on own or secretly.
- Feeling unable to get through a day without alcohol.
- Feeling unable to stop drinking once started.

## References

Guidance on the consumption of alcohol by children and young people [talkabouttrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CMOGuidance.pdf](https://talkabouttrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CMOGuidance.pdf)

UK Chief Medical Officers' Low Risk Drinking Guidelines [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/545937/UK\\_CMOs\\_\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/545937/UK_CMOs__report.pdf)

Information within this guide is based on Government and the UK Chief Medical Officers' guidelines and was current when going to press in October 2023. Statistics are drawn from:

- Smoking, Drinking And Drug Use Among Young People In England, 2021
- Health Survey for England 2021
- Statistics on Alcohol: England 2020
- Young people's substance misuse treatment statistics 2021 to 2022.
- Adult drinking habits in Great Britain 2017.

# How to get help

There are some great places to get help:

**Action on Addiction** -  
[actiononaddiction.org.uk](http://actiononaddiction.org.uk)

**Adfam** provides information and advice for families of alcohol and drug users. The website has a list of local family support services.

Tel: 0207 553 7640 [adfam.org.uk](http://adfam.org.uk)

**Alateen** is part of the Al-Anon fellowship and has been developed for young people, aged 12 to 20, who are affected by a problem drinker.

Tel: 0207 403 0888

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

**Childline** provides confidential help and counselling for young people.

Tel: 0800 1111 (Freephone)

[childline.org.uk](http://childline.org.uk)

**Drinkline** – If you're worried about your own or someone else's drinking, you can call this free helpline, in complete confidence. They can put you in touch with your local alcohol advice centre for help and advice.

Tel: 0300 123 1110

**The National Association for Children of Alcoholics** (NACOA) -  
[nacoa.org.uk](http://nacoa.org.uk)

**The Samaritans** -  
[samaritans.org/](http://samaritans.org/)

**We Are With You** provides treatment, help and advice about alcohol and drugs for young people and adults. It manages more than 120 services in 80 locations in England and Scotland.

[wearewithyou.org.uk](http://wearewithyou.org.uk)

## Further sources of information

Here are some good youth-friendly websites offering information and advice on alcohol:

**Life Stuff** - [life-stuff.org](http://life-stuff.org)

Offers advice and information on alcohol, cannabis, mental health, money worries, gaming and gambling for 16-25 year-olds.

**Talk About Alcohol** -

[talkaboutalcohol.com](http://talkaboutalcohol.com)

Here you'll find quizzes, interactive games and facts about alcohol.

**The Mix** – [themix.org.uk](http://themix.org.uk)

**Talk To Frank** – [talktofrank.com](http://talktofrank.com)

**One Too Many** – [onetoomany.co](http://onetoomany.co)

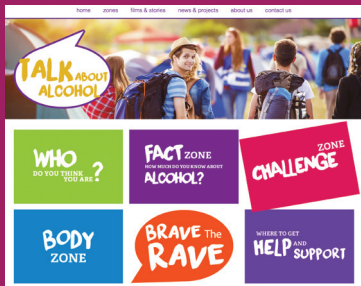
20 questions for older teenagers to assess their 'Alcohol Related Social Embarrassment' score.

**Young Minds** – [youngminds.org.uk](http://youngminds.org.uk)

**Riseabove** –

[riseabove.org.uk/tag/drinking-smoking-drugs/](http://riseabove.org.uk/tag/drinking-smoking-drugs/)

Riseabove has interesting and useful information to help get you talking about the things that matter. You'll find inspiring and useful stories, videos, games and advice.



Visit our interactive learning zone, [talkaboutalcohol.com](http://talkaboutalcohol.com), for games, films and quizzes.

Test your knowledge in the fact zone, see how units of alcohol add up over time in our virtual nightclub (the alcohol clock game), or discover more about yourself with the personality quizzes.



## WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

Are you clever, funny, smart or shy; a friend-in-need, or a good-time guy? When it comes to knowing ourselves, we all reckon we know who we are. But do we?

To discover more about yourself, give these simple quizzes a try and see if you agree with the results!

Go to Advanced level if you think have good self-awareness, if not then begin at Starter level and move up.



If you have any feedback or comments regarding this guide or the web materials on [talkaboutalcohol.com](http://talkaboutalcohol.com) please email [info@talkabouttrust.org](mailto:info@talkabouttrust.org)

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