



Alcohol after brain injury

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Introduction

Alcohol is a drug that is commonly used as part of many social and recreational activities. The general effect of drinking alcohol is to make people feel relaxed, but it can also negatively affect a number of skills such as information processing, memory, mobility and attention, among others.

A person's tolerance to alcohol reduces after a brain injury, so that brain injury survivors are often unable to drink alcohol in the same way as they did before their injury. As a result, survivors are often unsure of how much alcohol they can safely drink, or indeed, if they can drink alcohol at all.

This factsheet has been written to offer some information and guidance on alcohol consumption after brain injury. It explains how alcohol affects the brain after brain injury and offers tips for reducing alcohol consumption. Sources of further information and support are given at the end of the factsheet.

How does alcohol affect the brain?

Despite being legal, widely available and a large part of our culture, alcohol is actually classified as a depressant drug. This means that it has a dampening effect on a number of skills that the brain is responsible for processing. It does this by affecting the delicate balance of chemical processes in the brain. This chemical imbalance decreases the brain's ability to efficiently process skills such as attention, memory, mood and mobility.

Indeed, the function of the prefrontal cortex, a part of the brain that is specifically responsible for making decisions, processing information and monitoring behaviour, has been found to be negatively impacted by alcohol consumption.





Drinking behaviours after brain injury

Research has found that in the first year after brain injury, many survivors give up drinking alcohol altogether. There are several suggested reasons for this, such as being in a setting where alcohol is not easily accessible (such as a rehabilitation unit), or receiving information from therapists about the impact of drinking alcohol after brain injury. For instance, alcohol can interact with medications prescribed after brain injury, such as medications to control seizures. Therefore people are advised by professionals to refrain from alcohol for a period of time.

It is not until the survivor is back in a home environment and attempting to readjust their life after the injury, that they may begin drinking alcohol again.

Even at this stage and onwards, many survivors are only occasional drinkers, and many stop drinking alcohol altogether. Indeed, it is common for survivors to give up drinking after trying an alcoholic drink for the first time after their injury and realising first-hand how it negatively affects them.

One sangria (in my defence it was strong) resulted in me trying to get onto a table to dance and having to be carried back to my hotel. There I remained for two days. I felt terrible, and it put a big downer on the holiday... that was 17 years ago and I haven't had a drink since. If I am honest.... I do not miss alcohol.

Some survivors may continue to have a drink on occasion, for instance at social gatherings, and we hope that the information provided later in this factsheet can guide readers to doing so responsibly.

A rare few survivors, for instance those who lack insight into the impact of their injury, may drink regularly or heavily, and consequently become dependent on alcohol. It is thought that people who were heavy drinkers, or had depression or mental health issues prior to their brain injury, are more likely to become heavy alcohol drinkers afterwards, even if they do have an initial period of abstinence in the early days of their injury. Information about seeking support for alcohol addiction is available in the section *Professional support*.

Complications of alcohol and brain injury

Brain injury survivors generally have a reduced tolerance to alcohol. This means that the chemical processes that follow alcohol consumption occur faster in them than in people who do not have a brain injury, and therefore they feel the effects of it much more quickly.



Further, the effects of brain injury are often exacerbated, so that issues such as memory problems, mobility issues and behavioural issues are worsened after alcohol consumption.

As well as the lowered tolerance of alcohol, there are a number of other complications involved in alcohol consumption after brain injury. These are covered in some detail here.

Increased risk

Drinking alcohol can negatively affect mobility skills, which can put people at increased risk of falling. Falls are one of the most common causes of head injury. Indeed, research finds that many people admitted to hospital with a head injury were drunk at the time of the accident.

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

Exacerbation of effects such as memory problems, fatigue, information processing and decision making after drinking alcohol can also put a brain injury survivor at risk. For instance, exacerbated memory problems might cause a brain injury survivor to forget how to get home.

Interference with coping strategies

The effects of alcohol might interfere with a survivor's ability to employ coping strategies they have learnt over time to manage the effects of their injury. For instance, after drinking alcohol a brain injury survivor with anger problems may no longer be able to employ techniques they have learnt to control their anger, such as breathing deeply and removing themselves from the situation. As a result, they might get into a fight, therefore additionally putting themselves 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 as the brain attempts to restore balance to its chemical process, but ends up over-compensating. It is therefore very important to seek professional support when attempting to stop a dependence on alcohol. More information on this is available in the section *Professional support*.

Alcohol may also lower seizure threshold and so can cause seizures in people who have post-traumatic epilepsy.

Mood disorders

Some people use alcohol to cope with mood disorders such as depression and anxiety, as



it can have a temporary relaxing effect. However, long-term use of alcohol has been found to cause mood disorders to develop in some people, and worsen existing mood disorders such as depression. Alcohol may also interact negatively with mood disorder medication. It is always extremely important to check medication information labels and sheets before drinking alcohol.

Tips for managing alcohol after brain injury

In many cases it is advisable, and indeed the preferred option of many brain injury survivors, to avoid drinking alcohol completely after a brain injury. This option is made easier nowadays by the wide availability of non-alcoholic drinks, including non-alcoholic beers, wines, ciders and 'mocktails'.

I sometimes have a non-alcoholic beer shandy so I feel like I am having a pint, and have discovered things like elderflower cordial with soda. Nothing wrong with ordering a fancy coffee or mocktail either.

However, there may be occasions when you do wish to have an alcoholic drink. The following tips are offered to help you with doing this responsibly.

- Educate your family and friends on the impact of alcohol after brain injury. You might even wish to show them this factsheet. This should help to remove any social pressure to drink.
- Limit yourself to one or two drinks a night, and ask family and friends to help by reminding you to stop drinking after this.
- Never drive after drinking, even if you are below the national alcohol limit. Remember that alcohol will affect you more than it did before the injury, so you will be more sensitive to the effects. Make arrangements in advance to get a lift from a friend or a taxi if you are planning on drinking while out.
- Pace your drinking. You can do this by drinking slowly and monitoring how it makes you feel. You should also try to drink glasses of water in between.
- Eat some food before you start drinking. 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.
- Stick to one type of alcoholic drink rather than mixing drinks.



- Avoid drinking on your own. Rather, have people you trust around you while you're drinking so that they can offer support if needed.
- Remember that alcohol can exacerbate issues such as noise sensitivity and fatigue. Unfortunately, many parties, pubs and bars can be busy, noisy places, so try, if possible, to find a quieter spot such as a side room or outside in a beer garden.

My husband and I no longer go out as we used to, the pubs are way too noisy and we can't communicate. Parties and get-togethers I can only tolerate for about two hours maximum; after that I can't stay focused on a conversation.

Professional support

By being aware of the impact of alcohol after brain injury, and regulating drinking accordingly or giving up on drinking alcohol altogether, many survivors are able to manage this aspect of their lives without much difficulty. However, some survivors may become dependent on alcohol, or fail to recognise the impact that drinking alcohol has on them. In such cases, it might be necessary to seek 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. This test will assess your drinking behaviour and give you information about whether you should seek professional support.

The professional best suited to support someone with the cognitive, emotional, behavioural and psychological effects of brain injury is a neuropsychologist. You can discuss getting a referral to a neuropsychologist with your GP. Neuropsychologists might be able offer support with the underlying reasons that you drink alcohol.

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 area that can help. You can search for this on the NHS' services directory at www.nhs.uk/service-search/Alcohol-addiction/LocationSearch/1805.

Conclusion

Sustaining a brain injury can lower a person's tolerance to alcohol, as well as causing a number of additional complications. We hope that this factsheet has helped to inform you of the reasons why drinking can be harmful after a brain injury. We also hope that the tips offered in this factsheet will help you to drink safely and responsibly if and when you do decide to have a drink.

Useful organisations

Drinkline - this is the national alcohol helpline, and is available on weekdays from 9am - 8pm and weekdays from 11am - 4pm, on 0300 123 1100.

Addaction

Tel: 020 7251 5860

Web: www.addaction.org.uk

Adfam

Tel: 020 3817 9410

Web: www.adfam.org.uk

Al-Anon Family Groups

Helpline: 020 7403 0888

Web: www.al-anonuk.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous

Helpline: 0800 9177 650

Email: help@aamail.org

Web: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Drinkaware

Tel: 020 7766 9900

Web: www.drinkaware.co.uk

Email: contact@drinkaware.co.uk

To discuss any issues raised in this factsheet, contact the Headway helpline on 0808 800 2244 or helpline@headway.org.uk (Monday - Friday, 9am - 5pm).

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