



Alcohol Use and Abuse

Alcohol is a drug, albeit a legal one; indeed, it is the UK's favourite drug. And it is a growing social problem nationwide, one which is of particular concern among younger age groups. You should think about the effects that drinking has on your body and your mental state. Some students choose not to drink alcohol at all; many others drink safely without any problems or impact on their studies – but not all. This policy is designed to advise of the potential dangers of the abuse of alcohol, to establish some guidelines for its proper use, and to encourage a culture of self-regulation and a respect and care for others and oneself.

Health and Safety issues

Official guidelines recommend no more than 3-4 units a day for adult men and 2-3 units a day for adult women. As a general rule 1 unit is half a pint of beer, lager or cider, one small glass (125ml) of wine, or a 25 ml measure of spirit. So safe drinking means about 14 units for women and 21 units for men per week – that is, spread over the week. Binge-drinking all 14 or 21 units at once is bad for your health and potentially very dangerous. Some useful information on the amount of alcohol in commercial drinks can be found in the Drinkaware web site (<http://www.drinkaware.co.uk/>) and wider advice from the Portman Group web site (<http://www.portmangroup.org.uk/>). You might be surprised to find that small (125ml) glass of Red Jacob's Creek wine (as a popular example) contains 1.6 units of alcohol.

It takes your body about an hour to process one unit of alcohol, so you need to pace your drinking so that your body can cope. Also, metabolisms vary, and you need to know how much you can safely drink and remain in control of yourself and the social situation. The effects can start within ten minutes and depending on the individual can last for many hours. Slurred speech, vomiting, loss of balance, distorted vision are just some of the more immediate effects of drinking on the body, if you consume too much at once; so is unconsciousness. Very high amounts consumed rapidly can lead to alcohol poisoning, which can be fatal, as can the combination of unconsciousness and vomiting. Excessive consumption can lead to anti-social conduct, aggression, intimidation or violence. Long-term use is linked to liver damage, heart disease, brain damage, some cancers and several disorders of the reproductive system and sexual organs. Remember that it is possible to remain under the influence of alcohol the morning after a heavy drinking bout. Take 48 hours without alcohol to allow your system to recover.

You should not drink alcohol if:

- You might be in the early stages of pregnancy
- You will be operating machinery, or equipment in a practical class
- You may be driving a car. CUSU has a policy that no-one should drive on official CUSU business within 48 hours of drinking.

National statistics indicate that the prevalence of hazardous drinking in the 16-24 age group is over 50% for men and 30% for women – the highest prevalence for any age group. In common with many University towns the local NHS has expressed concern about the level of alcohol related admissions to Addenbrookes.

Alcohol is an addictive drug and there is strong evidence that abuse of alcohol and alcohol dependency may stem from drinking in order to relieve stress, anxiety, and depressive thoughts – all of which are not uncommon among a student population, and for all of which help is available. Alcohol is a depressant and can exacerbate pre-existing depressive conditions as well as precipitate them. If your drinking habits are affecting your life and studying and you need help with the issues underlying your drinking, or if you know somebody in this situation, the following organisations can advise and help:

UCS (01223 332865, <http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/alcohol.html>)

The Cambridge Drug And Alcohol Service (01223 723020)

Drinksense, 4a Gonville Place, Cambridge CB1 1LY, tel. 302850

Personal safety

An estimated 23,000 alcohol-related incidents take place in Britain each week. Being on the streets under the influence of drink puts you at greater risk of physical or sexual assault. So for safety, stay with friends, look out for your friends, don't walk back to your College alone at night, and take extra care on night-time roads. You should also be alert to the risk of drink spiking.

Antisocial behaviour is often associated with excessive drinking. Although alcohol is a depressant it can exaggerate whatever mood you are in when you start drinking. When drunk, you may unwittingly seem more threatening to others, influencing how they react to you. Avoiding violence when not fully in control of yourself can be difficult; your perceptions will be dulled, it will take you longer to react and think things through, and your judgement may be reduced. Aim to talk your way out a situation, avoiding aggressive language, and using open body language. But always bear in mind that when you have been drinking, you will be more vulnerable to difficulties and danger than when sober.

College

Alcohol still plays a major part in the social life of most students; Organisers of student events should always make sure that good quality alcohol free alternative drinks are available. A strong social emphasis on alcohol can be insensitive to students whose cultures do not endorse the use of alcohol and to those who choose not to use it.

The College wants to encourage students who choose to use alcohol to use it carefully, and not to abuse it. It is both foolish and dangerous to encourage others to drink more than they ought or wish by forcing them to participate in competitive drinking games – and in forms of 'initiation' to some student societies.

Those responsible for organising College functions should ensure that excessive quantities of alcohol are not available to guests and that only sensible drinking takes place. This also holds for events organised by the JCR and the MCR and by College clubs and societies. The JCR should consider carefully whether it is appropriate to encourage Bar promotions involving neat spirits or alcopops. The National Union of Students runs an alcohol awareness campaign which provides useful advice: <http://www.nistudentsdrugs.info/defaulttrue.asp>

College Staff have a responsibility to ensure that Dinner in Hall is enjoyable and civilised for all present. Diners should exercise restraint and not drink to excess; hosts should look after their guests and friends look after one another. If a diner doesn't exercise restraint, he or she will be asked to leave the Hall, as will any diners playing competitive drinking games who do not stop when asked. Diners whose drinking leads them to behave without consideration for the Staff may also be required to leave.

The College Bar Staff have a responsibility to ensure that College members and their guests do not drink to excess; those who do will be refused further service and may be asked to leave the Bar. It is illegal for Bar staff to serve someone who is clearly inebriated.

Student societies that have initiations which involve drinking, and encouraging other to drink, to excess are strongly discouraged; drunken behaviour resulting from such initiations will be considered to be in breach of discipline (see next section).

Disciplinary matters

A person whose behaviour is so affected by drinking as to make others feel threatened may be considered to be in breach of discipline. Drunkenness is not a defence; it cannot be regarded as a mitigating circumstance in any matter concerning a breach of discipline. Anyone who causes damage to property not his or her own, or who harms another person, or who disturbs the peace, or who requires the involvement of the emergency services because of alcohol consumption, will be considered to be in breach of discipline.

Anyone who encourages another to consume alcohol to the point of drunkenness or beyond will be considered to be in breach of discipline. The offence will be considered aggravated if there is an element of intimidation or bullying, that is, the person being encouraged to consume alcohol has indicated his or her reluctance to do so.

Like many things in life alcohol can be safe and enjoyable when consumed in moderation. Take care of your own consumption and be responsible in relation to that of others.

With acknowledgements to St Catharine's College, Cambridge and the University of Leeds.