



ONE TOO MANY ... ALCOHOL AND SEXUAL HEALTH

Briefing for professionals on integrating alcohol into sexual health consultations.

Alcohol is commonly drunk to make people feel more relaxed, confident and sociable. Because of these effects, some people also use alcohol to help them start new sexual relationships. However, excessive alcohol consumption can reduce inhibition and impair judgement. This increases the likelihood of sexual risk taking, which in turn increases the risk of catching a sexually transmitted infection (STI) and/or becoming pregnant. In a worst case scenario it may lead to sexual assault.

Despite this negative impact on decision making, drinkers still value the effect of alcohol on their behaviour. Compared to many other European countries, the UK has a culture of binge drinking. Research shows that young women in particular appear to be drinking much more, and more frequently, than is regarded as safe by the Government. This can put their sexual, physical and psychological health at risk.

Calls to **fpa**'s helpline indicate that this is not only an issue for young women. Men and women of all ages regularly seek advice about alcohol related sexual risk taking. Common scenarios include unprotected sex with a regular partner, one-off sex with someone unknown, or sex with a sex worker.

Often sexual risk taking can lead to regret or feelings of guilt the 'morning after'. This is often made worse by not being able to remember what happened, not knowing where to get help and advice, or not wanting to get help and advice for fear of being judged.

Although it seems obvious that alcohol may lead to sexual risk taking, there is very little research to support this hypothesis. Additionally, people's perceptions of sexual risk taking and alcohol are complex and can vary from situation to situation. This can make it very difficult when considering what health strategies would be most useful in addressing the public health issues related to alcohol and sexual health risk taking including a rise in STI rates and unplanned pregnancy.

What can health professionals do?

Identify those at risk

Using opportunities such as:

- When a new patient registers with a service.
- During consultations on contraception, pregnancy, abortion or STIs.
- During consultations on other topics. Provide the opportunity for people to discuss concerns or questions on sexual health and alcohol.

Improve knowledge and increase awareness

- Do not address sexual health and alcohol issues in isolation from each other.
- Provide individuals with basic information about the effects of alcohol on sexual desire and disinhibition.

Provide support in reducing risk taking

- Provide the opportunity for one-to-one discussions in a confidential setting.
- Do not make judgements about behaviour.
- Provide verbal and written information about alcohol and sexual risk taking.
- Display messages about the link between alcohol and risk taking by using posters encouraging people to ask for advice.
- Signpost to useful leaflets, organisations, websites and campaign materials.
- Forge links with local statutory and voluntary alcohol and specialist sexual health services.

Remember ...

People do not always get drunk by choice. Sometimes they are encouraged or coerced by their peers or partner. Sometimes it will be as a result of having their drink spiked. The outcomes of any of these may be:

- A loss of will power.
- Being persuaded not to use condoms.
- An inability to put a condom on.
- No memory of whether they have had sex or not, or whether it was protected or not.

And finally

For people identified as being potentially at risk:

- Provide a supply of condoms, including for those using a regular method of contraception.
- Don't assume people know how to put condoms on. Offer condom demonstrations when distributing supplies.
- Explain the possible physical difficulties of putting on a condom when drunk.
- Explain the possible physical effects of alcohol on sexual arousal, such as difficulty maintaining an erection and vaginal dryness.
- Provide information about using emergency contraception, including where to get it from.

Sources of information

www.drinkaware.co.uk – Information for professionals and the public.

www.alcoholconcern.org.uk – Supports professionals by providing expertise, information and guidance.

www.units.nhs.uk – NHS Choices: know your limits.

Further information

How fpa can help you

sexual health direct – the nationwide service run by **fpa** – provides: confidential information and advice and a wide range of booklets on individual methods of contraception, common sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy choices, abortion and planning a pregnancy, details of contraception, sexual health and genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics and sexual assault referral centres.

fpa helplines

sexual health direct – England helpline 0845 122 8690
9am to 6pm Monday to Friday.

Northern Ireland helpline 0845 122 8687
9am to 5pm Monday to Thursday, 9am to 4.30pm Friday
or visit **fpa's** website www.fpa.org.uk.



fpa training

fpa offers high quality sexual health training. Find out more at www.fpa.org.uk/Training.