

# CHOOSE YOURSELF. NOT ALCOHOL

Alcohol awareness and  
support for young people

Professionals Guide

# ALCOHOL HARM IN THE UK

According to the Office of National Statistics there were **10,473** deaths from alcohol specific causes registered in the UK in 2023, the highest number on record, but the rate of alcohol-specific deaths (**15.9** per 100,000 people) decreased slightly compared with 2022 (**16.6** deaths per 100,000 people).

**37%** of pupils aged 11-16 said they had 'ever had an alcoholic drink', prevalence increases with age from **15%** of 11-year-olds to **62%** of 15-year-olds.

**5%** of all pupils said they usually drank alcohol at least once per week similar to **6%** in 2021. The proportion of those drinking alcohol at least once per week also increases with age from **1%** of 11-year-olds to **1%** of 15-year-olds.

**13**

Research indicates that the average age a person first tries alcohol is now **13**. Alcohol can have serious effects on developing brains and bodies and leaving teenagers vulnerable to unsafe situations.



Drinking alcohol is seen as something teenagers are expected to do as part of growing up but starting to drink so young is more damaging than many teenagers realise.

Let children know that alcohol isn't needed to have fun and is not a solution to a problem. This should help prevent them from relating alcohol to feeling sad or stressed and will also help them to build their confidence to say no if they ever feel under pressure to drink.

**30%**

People often characterised drinking when young as a 'rite of passage' or a bit of fun. However, three in ten young people who have drunk alcohol (30 per cent) have experienced a negative consequence of their drinking.

# UNDERAGE ALCOHOL USE - THE LAW

If a person is under 18 and drinking alcohol in public, they can be stopped, fined, or arrested by police.

If they're under 18, it's against the law:

- For someone to sell them alcohol
- To buy or try to buy alcohol
- For an adult to buy or try to buy alcohol for them
- To drink alcohol in licensed premises (e.g. a pub or restaurant)

However, if someone is 16 or 17 and accompanied by an adult, they can drink (but not buy) beer, wine or cider with a meal.

If they're 16 or under, they may be able to go to a pub (or premises primarily used to sell alcohol) if they're accompanied by an adult. However, this isn't always the case. It can also depend on:

- The specific conditions for that premises
- The licensable activities taking place there

It's not illegal for a child aged five to 16 to drink alcohol at home or on other private premises.

**This does not mean it is recommended.**

We strongly advise an alcohol-free childhood, as recommended by the Chief Medical Officers.

It's illegal to give alcohol to children under five years old.



# WHY YOUNG PEOPLE MAY DRINK

## RISKY BEHAVIOUR

Risky behaviour is higher in puberty, and as such, young people can take risks deliberately, make a risk assessment, and decide it's worth it.

This is because teenagers are struggling with two important changes to the brain during adolescence:

- Puberty switches on a capacity for strong emotions, impulsive behaviour, and a need for sensations. It's why they'll take risks even when they 'know better.'
- The part of the brain that assesses risks, plans ahead, sees consequences, and governs self-control is not fully developed until 16 or 17 years old and even then, it still needs fine-tuning well into the 20s.

## THEY WANT TO BE LIKE OTHERS

Whether it is their parent, friends or older siblings, children want to fit in and be like people they look up to. As parents, it is important to recognise that kids don't always do what you say; they do what you do. If a child's parents consistently drink or drink to excess around their children, it can set an example for the children, which they are likely to emulate.

From a very early age, children want to fit in.

When they are young, their parents are their main influencers, but their focus shifts to acceptance by their friends as they age. If drinking is considered the norm in their social group, teenagers may want to join in to feel part of the crowd.

As well as peers, there is also a need to consider older siblings. As older siblings are granted age-based privilege, whether it is staying up late or being able to drink alcohol, younger children are likely to want to copy, whether out of rivalry or due to a desire to be like them.

Young people see alcohol and drinking all around them. Social media plays a huge part in our teenagers and even younger children's lives. Through these channels, young people are bombarded with examples of drink and drinking. Social media can spread images and ideas rapidly, which can be risky incitements to act irresponsibly.

They may have problems with themselves, family, school, or friends. One reason people drink alcohol is to try and cope with problems or stress, and children are no different. Young people have as many things as adults that could worry, scare, or pressure them. We need to recognise that they might feel alcohol could be the solution to exam stress, not fitting in with peers or conflict at home.





## FOETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDER (FASD)

Drinking during pregnancy increases the risk of causing harm to the unborn child. FASD is a term given for all the various problems that can affect a child if their mother drinks alcohol during pregnancy. Children who have FASD can have several physical, emotional, behavioural, and neurological problems.

FASD is the most common non-genetic cause of learning disabilities in the UK. An estimated 7000 babies are born a year with FASD. However, the condition often goes undiagnosed or is diagnosed as autism or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) rather than being recognised as a presentation of FASD.

This condition is preventable only when there is no prenatal alcohol exposure. The UK Chief Medical Officer's guidance changed in 2016 to recommend that **no alcohol be consumed during pregnancy and when planning a pregnancy.**

**WHAT ARE THE  
POTENTIAL PROBLEMS  
LINKED TO DRINKING  
ALCOHOL IN PREGNANCY  
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?**



# HIDDEN HARMS

The term 'hidden harm' is commonly used to describe the experiences of children and young people as a result of parental drug or alcohol misuse. Both children and parents/carers are often 'hidden' and silent and do not actively engage with services.

There are around **600,000** dependent drinkers in England, and around **200,000** children living with an alcohol-dependent parent or carer. The pressures of caring for a family member who is drinking harmfully can be overwhelming and there can be lifelong effects on the children.

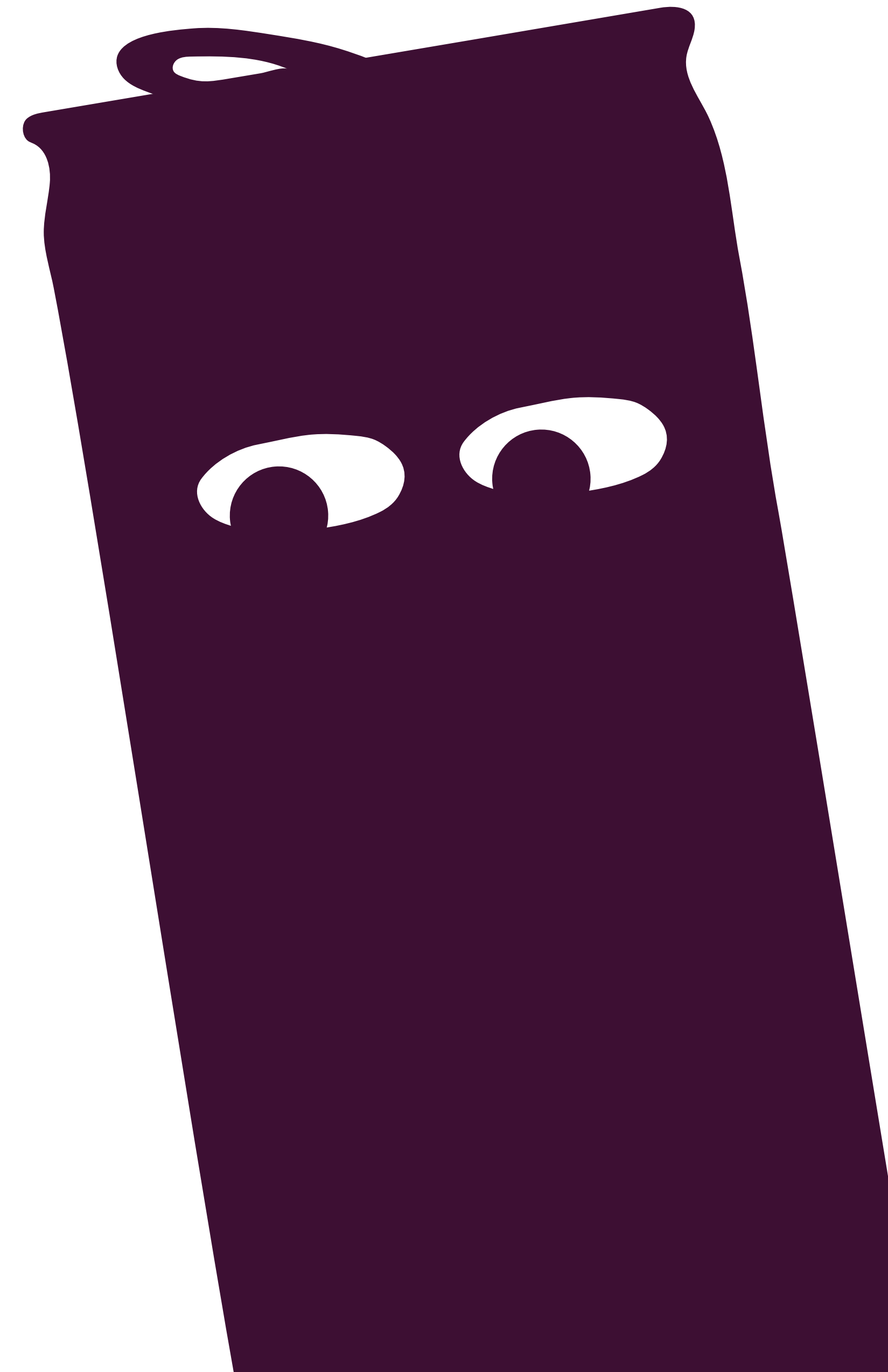
## 1,317

It is estimated that **1,317** children in Barnsley live with an adult who is dependent on alcohol, and we know only a small number (16 per cent) of these parents/carers are known to treatment services.

Children of parents and carers who misuse alcohol are at an increased risk of physical and psychological health consequences and negative social and educational impacts. For example, these include but are not limited to children experiencing physical neglect, abuse, and poverty.

In addition, there is evidence to suggest that children of parents/carers who misuse substances are more likely to use and initiate the use of substances themselves at an early age, develop health-harming behaviours, and become involved in anti-social or criminal behaviours.

It is important that parents and carers follow the guidance around alcohol consumption and seek help for their alcohol use if it becomes a problem. Support is available for parents and carers from our local specialist alcohol service – please see the finding support section on page 12.



# YOUNG PEOPLE'S ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AND INDIVIDUAL HARM

Drinking alcohol during childhood can have serious effects which include but are not limited to:

## ALCOHOL POISONING

Anyone who drinks a lot in a short space of time can suffer alcohol poisoning. Children are especially vulnerable because of their smaller size. It starts by affecting your speech and balance but can affect your breathing, heartbeat and body temperature regulation leading to hyperthermia. It can also affect your gag reflex, putting you at increased risk of choking.

## ACCIDENTS AND INJURIES

Drinking alcohol can reduce a child's mental and physical abilities at the time, affecting judgment and coordination, which can lead to mishaps and sometimes accidents and injuries.

## APPEARANCE & SIDE EFFECTS

Research shows that underage drinkers are more likely to suffer from a range of health issues, including weight loss, disturbed sleep, and headaches.

## MENTAL HEALTH

Alcohol can affect your child's mental health and affect how well your child does at school. It is linked to stress, depression, and self-harming behaviour.

## BRAIN DEVELOPMENT & MENTAL HEALTH

During childhood and teenage years, the brain is still developing. Alcohol can affect memory function, reactions, learning ability and attention span. Evidence also reveals that children who start to drink by age 13 are more likely to have worse grades, skip school and, in the worst-case scenario, be excluded from school.

When alcohol becomes a permanent feature in a person's life, it's not just the drinker that feels the effects. Surrounding family and friends do too.

## OTHER SUBSTANCES & VULNERABILITY

While excessive drinking by adolescents is a problem, it can be linked to other harmful behaviours, like taking illicit drugs. Compared to non-drinkers, underage drinkers are more likely to smoke tobacco, use cannabis or use other hard drugs.

Puberty is often a very tricky time for kids, both emotionally and physically. Their natural tendency to experiment and take risks is increased. Drinking alcohol can put them in vulnerable or dangerous situations.



## LIVER DAMAGE

Drinking alcohol can increase the risk of developing liver disease, and young people who drink regularly are also at risk and start to damage their livers without realising. The warning signs only show after a few years. In Britain, significant numbers of people are now dying of alcoholic liver disease in their twenties.

## SEXUAL HEALTH

Sexual activity is often linked with alcohol consumption in ways that are viewed as culturally acceptable. However, the relationship between alcohol and sexual health is increasingly cited as a cause for concern.

There is strong evidence that excessive alcohol consumption is associated with poor sexual health outcomes such as unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and sexual assault. The UK has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Europe, and rates of abortions and STIs are increasing.

Drinking alcohol decreases inhibition, increases confidence, and has a detrimental effect on the judgement that can influence decision-making around sex and condom or contraception use. Alcohol use is also associated with the early onset of sexual activity That can later be regretted due to poor judgement/decision-making when drunk.

## PROTECTIVE FACTORS THAT INHIBIT ALCOHOL MISUSE IN YOUNG PEOPLE

Protective factors are significant as they can ease risk factors. **Our examination of the evidence about protective factors has shown that:**

- The location of a young person's first drink may be important to future alcohol misuse. Children who first use alcohol in a home environment and learn about its effects from parents are less likely to misuse alcohol than those who begin drinking outside the home and experiment with peers.
- Delaying the time of a young person's first drink may reduce the risk of harmful drinking.
- Having adults who retain good relationships with a young person, characterised by appropriate

levels of support and control, is likely to be protective.

- Controlled alcohol use is not in itself predictive of negative outcomes.
- Religious affiliation, especially attendance at religious services, may have a protective effect against alcohol consumption.
- Key factors that seem to buffer the adverse effects of alcohol consumption in children and young people include informed and supportive parental guidance about alcohol and a delay in the age of initiation into drinking.



# YOUNG PEOPLE'S ALCOHOL USE AND STIGMA

Alcohol use disorders are more severely stigmatised than other forms of mental illness. Individuals experiencing alcohol use disorders are perceived to be more dangerous and unpredictable and are more likely to be considered weak instead of sick and needing treatment.

More 'weak-not-sick' attitudes were associated with weaker intentions to seek help from peers, family, formal sources, and the internet.

The stigma associated with children and young people who misuse alcohol can lead to discrimination, social isolation, delayed problem recognition, and avoidance of professional treatment.

Children and young people are more likely to seek help and support from their peers. The stigma attached to drinking can lead a young person not to seek support from their peers over fears of being ostracised or being provided with unhelpful advice.

Reducing the stigma of alcohol misuse increases the likelihood of a Young Person seeking help from family members and alcohol services. Seeking help early is crucial in reducing the long-term effects of alcohol misuse.

Additionally, young people can often be pressured into drinking alcohol by their peers, particularly in social settings; it's common for them to be shamed for turning down a drink and made to feel like they don't fit in. While drinking alcohol is seen as something teenagers do as part of growing up or distracting themselves from life's pressures, it can be more damaging than we think.

It should be acceptable not to drink, and heavy drinking at an early age should not be dismissed as youthful rebellion – the reasons teenagers start drinking can be complicated and varied.



# HOW TO SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE CONSUMING ALCOHOL

It is challenging to know when exactly using alcohol is more than just 'usual.' Dependency becomes more apparent when the young person spends most of their time thinking about, looking for or using alcohol. Alcohol then becomes the focus of the young person's life. They ignore their everyday work, such as not doing their schoolwork or stopping their usual hobbies or sports, such as dancing or football.

## HOW DO I KNOW IF THERE IS A PROBLEM OR DEPENDENCY?

Occasional use can be tough to detect. If the young person is regularly drinking, their behaviour often changes.

### Look for signs such as:

- unexplained moodiness
- behaviour that is out of character
- loss of interest in school or friends
- unexplained loss of clothes or money
- unusual smells and items

Remember, the changes can also mean other problems rather than using alcohol.

## BE A RESPONSIBLE ROLE MODEL

Parents, carers, professionals, or other role models will influence the young person's attitudes towards alcohol well before having their first experiences with them.

## TALK OPENLY AND HONESTLY

...about alcohol whenever a young person starts asking you questions about it. This might include why people can enjoy it, such as socialising and relaxing, drawbacks such as hangovers and getting sick, and the risks posed by alcohol.

## MAKE CONVERSATIONS

...about alcohol and safe choices part of the day-to-day rather than a one-off 'big talk.' The more you talk about these issues in the family or support settings, the more young people will know they can

come to you for information and support when they need to.

## HELP A YOUNG PERSON TO MAKE SAFE AND HEALTHY DECISIONS

Be clear about the connections between drinking and self-confidence. Encourage the young person to strengthen their confidence and wellbeing in other ways such as exercise or sport, doing activities and hobbies they enjoy and spending time with friends and family.

## FIND OUT WHAT YOU CAN

...about the law and the health and safety risks associated with underage alcohol use. This will help you feel more confident about setting boundaries and talking to a young person about alcohol.

# FINDING SUPPORT

## ALCOHOL SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, PARENTS, OR CARERS IN BARNSELEY AND BEYOND

### Space

Help is available for young people who may be experiencing problems with alcohol from Space – free and confidential service provided by Barnsley Recovery Steps.

Call 01226 779066 or email [brs.referrals@waythrough.org.uk](mailto:brs.referrals@waythrough.org.uk)

### Barnsley Recovery Steps (adults)

Providing free and confidential support if you would like to make changes to your drug or alcohol use in Barnsley.

You can find out more information or complete the online referral form by accessing the Barnsley Recovery Steps website: [www.barnsleyrecoverysteps.org.uk](http://www.barnsleyrecoverysteps.org.uk)

### Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

A free self-help group; its '12-step' programme involves getting sober with the help of regular support groups

### Further support and information:

Find out what every parent needs to know about alcohol before 18 at [www.whatstheharm.co.uk](http://www.whatstheharm.co.uk)



## INFORMATION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE:

### Rise Above

[www.riseabove.org.uk](http://www.riseabove.org.uk)

### Talk to Frank

[www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)



# FINDING SUPPORT

## FAMILY LIFE AND ALCOHOL:

### Al-Anon Family Groups

Al-Anon Family Groups provide support to anyone whose life is, or has been, affected by someone else's drinking, regardless of whether that person is still drinking or not.

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

### Adfam

Adfam improve life for families affected by drugs and alcohol. They provide information about family support services.

[www.adfam.org.uk](http://www.adfam.org.uk)

## CONCERNED ABOUT ALCOHOL?

### GP / NHS

You can talk to your GP or contact NHS 111

### Drinkline

Drinkline runs a free, confidential helpline for people who are concerned about their drinking, or someone else's.

Call free **0300 123 1110** (weekdays 9am–8pm, weekends 11am–4pm)

### Alcoholics Anonymous

Call **0800 9177650** (24hour, 7 days a week)

## ADVICE AND SUPPORT FOR SEXUAL HEALTH:

### Spectrum Community Health

<https://spectrumhealth.org.uk/services/sexual-health/find-clinic-3/>

Call **0800 055 6442**

Email: [barnsley.sharp@spectrum-cic.nhs.uk](mailto:barnsley.sharp@spectrum-cic.nhs.uk)

## EMERGENCIES:

If you or someone else needs urgent help after taking drugs or drinking, call **999** for an ambulance. Tell the crew everything you know. It could save their life.