
THE TRUTH ABOUT
ALCOHOL
drugfreeworld.org

WHY THIS BOOKLET WAS PRODUCED

You hear a lot of talk about drugs these days—at school, in the streets, on the internet and TV. Some of it is true, some not.

What you may not know is that much of what you hear about drugs actually comes from those selling them. Former dealers have said they would tell people anything to get them to buy drugs.

But what about alcohol? Is it really a drug? After all, it is legal, it is a part of social life and drinking small quantities of alcohol is even recommended by some doctors.

In surveys we conducted, alcohol came up at the top of the list of substances youth said they are most likely to use and that they consider a problem. Because it takes so many young lives (more than all other drugs combined), it is the substance parents are most worried about.

You need the real facts and the truth about drugs so you can make an informed decision about them. That is why we have prepared this booklet—for you.

Your feedback is important to us, so let us know what you think about this booklet. Visit us at **DrugFreeWorld.org** and email us at **info@drugfreeworld.org**.

What Is Alcohol?

Alcohol *is* a drug.

Classified as a depressant, alcohol impairs the central nervous system, leading to slowed functions in the body. This results in slurred speech, unsteady movement, distorted perceptions and an inability to react quickly.

As for how it affects the mind, alcohol reduces a person's ability to think rationally and distorts his or her judgment.

The amount of alcohol consumed determines its impact. Many people drink alcohol for its stimulant effects, such as a beer or glass of wine to "loosen up." However, as someone drinks more alcohol, they experience its depressant properties and begin feeling mentally clouded or lose coordination and control.

Alcohol overdose can cause severe depressant reactions: inability to feel pain, vomiting (a response to toxicity), unconsciousness, coma or even death. These effects depend on the amount and speed of alcohol consumption.

There are different kinds of alcohol. Ethyl alcohol (ethanol), the only alcohol used in beverages, is created through fermentation, a chemical process in which yeast breaks down certain food ingredients, such as grains or fruits, to produce alcohol.



Alcohol Content

Fermented drinks, like beer and wine, typically contain from 2 percent alcohol to 20 percent alcohol.

Distilled drinks, such as liquor, contain from 40 percent to 50 percent or more alcohol.

The alcohol content of common beverages is:

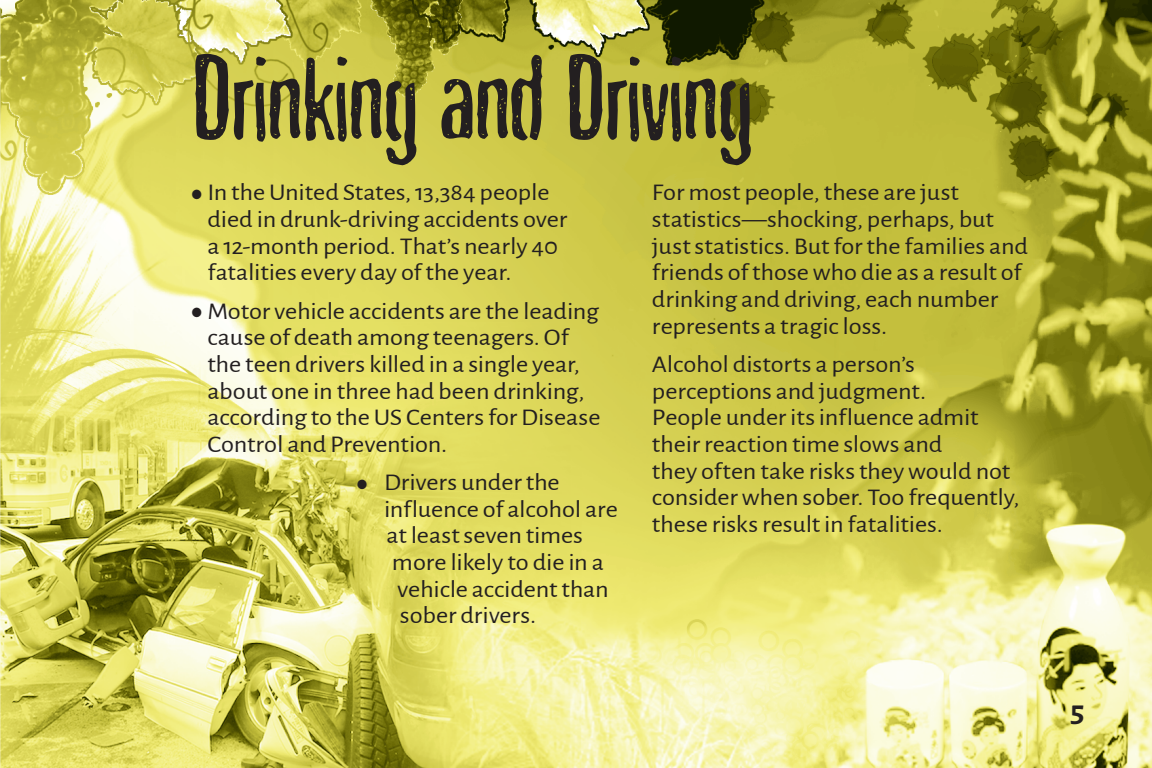
Beer	**2—8% alcohol**
Cider	**4—8% alcohol**
Wine	**8—14% alcohol**
Tequila	**40% alcohol**
Rum	**40% or more alcohol**
Brandy	**40% or more alcohol**
Gin	**37.5—50% alcohol**
Liqueurs	**15—55% alcohol**
Whiskey	**40—68% alcohol**
Vodka	**35—95% alcohol**

Drinking and Driving

- In the United States, 13,384 people died in drunk-driving accidents over a 12-month period. That's nearly 40 fatalities every day of the year.
- Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death among teenagers. Of the teen drivers killed in a single year, about one in three had been drinking, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Drivers under the influence of alcohol are at least seven times more likely to die in a vehicle accident than sober drivers.

For most people, these are just statistics—shocking, perhaps, but just statistics. But for the families and friends of those who die as a result of drinking and driving, each number represents a tragic loss.

Alcohol distorts a person's perceptions and judgment. People under its influence admit their reaction time slows and they often take risks they would not consider when sober. Too frequently, these risks result in fatalities.



Understanding How Alcohol Affects the Body

Alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream through the small blood vessels in the stomach and small intestine. Within minutes, it travels to the brain, slowing the action of nerve cells.

Approximately 20 percent of alcohol is absorbed through the stomach. Most of the remaining 80 percent is absorbed through the small intestine.

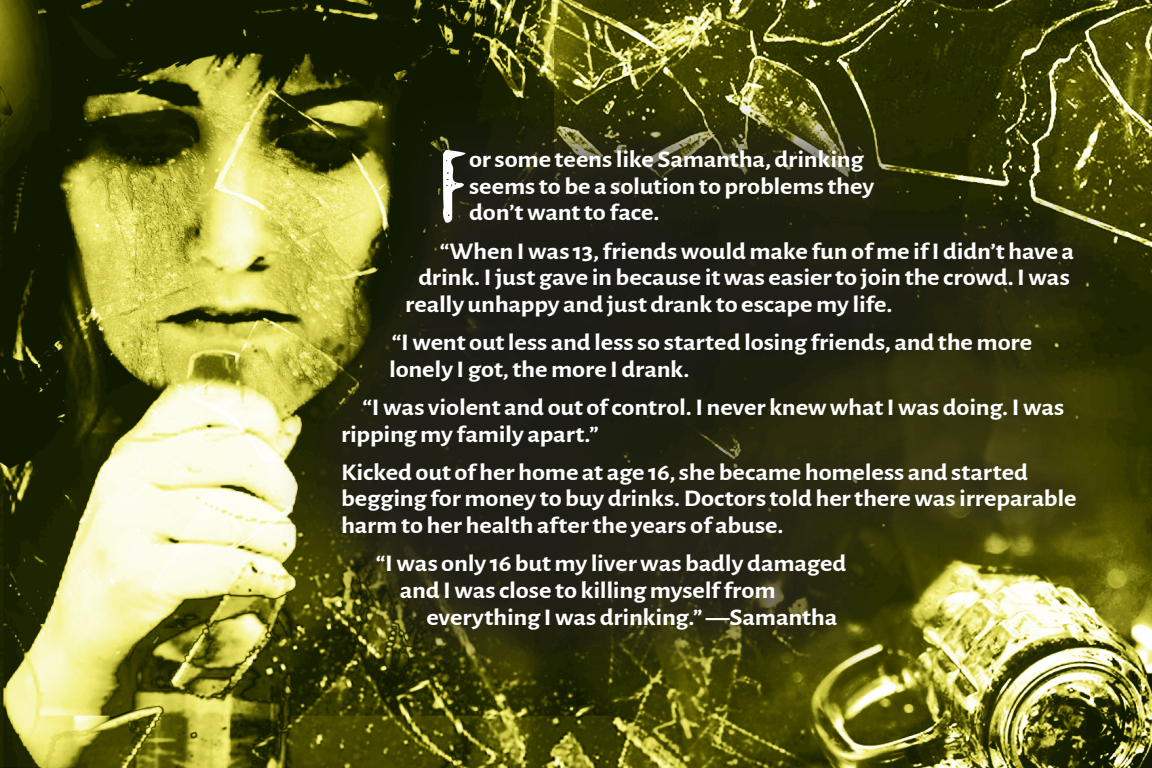
Alcohol is also carried by the bloodstream to the liver, which processes the alcohol, converting it to a nontoxic substance. However, the liver can only metabolize a limited amount of alcohol at a time. The excess circulates into the bloodstream, intensifying its effects on the body.

When blood-alcohol levels become too high, the respiratory system slows down, potentially leading to coma or even death if the brain is deprived of oxygen.

YOUNG PEOPLE VS. ADULTS What's the Difference?

For teens, alcohol is even more harmful than it is to adults. Teen's brains are still developing through adolescence and into early adulthood. Drinking during this critical period can cause permanent damage to learning ability, memory, motor skills and coordination.

Research shows that young people who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol addiction than those who start at 21.



For some teens like Samantha, drinking seems to be a solution to problems they don't want to face.

"When I was 13, friends would make fun of me if I didn't have a drink. I just gave in because it was easier to join the crowd. I was really unhappy and just drank to escape my life.

"I went out less and less so started losing friends, and the more lonely I got, the more I drank.

"I was violent and out of control. I never knew what I was doing. I was ripping my family apart."

Kicked out of her home at age 16, she became homeless and started begging for money to buy drinks. Doctors told her there was irreparable harm to her health after the years of abuse.

"I was only 16 but my liver was badly damaged and I was close to killing myself from everything I was drinking." —Samantha

What Is Binge Drinking?

Binge drinking is the practice of consuming large quantities of alcohol at one time. It is typically defined as five or more drinks for a man and four or more for a woman.

In the United States, binge drinking is the most common form of alcohol abuse, often leading to accidents (falls, burns and car crashes) as well as medical conditions such as heart disease, liver disease and stroke.



I binge drink every chance I get and, to be honest, I am disgusted with myself, but I cannot control my desire to do it. If I drink too much or drink certain drinks, I get breathless and go blotchy all over my body, but I continue to drink until I am so exhausted I fall asleep. I am not sure that I am strong enough to quit my stupidity." —Allen



By the time I was in my mid-20s I was locked in to drinking.

"A lot of my first concerns were about drinking, and everything else came second.

"I started to realize that, when I didn't have a drink, I had a sense of panic and I would start shaking.

"If I had to go without a drink, I would go through shakes and sweats. I couldn't go for more than a few hours without a drink."
—Paul

This past year I have gone to work drunk, blacked out in clubs and bars and can't remember getting home. Ashamedly, I slept with someone and couldn't even remember the person coming home with me until we bumped into each other the next day.

"I've destroyed two relationships because I hurt them so much through my drinking, but I put drinking first.

"My parents are so hurt that their daughter is killing herself for apparently no reason."

—Jamie



What Is Alcoholism or Alcohol Dependence?

Alcoholism has four main symptoms:

- **Craving:** A strong need or compulsion to drink.
- **Loss of control:** Inability to limit one's drinking on any given occasion.
- **Physical dependence:** Withdrawal symptoms—such as nausea, sweating, shakiness and anxiety—occur when alcohol use suddenly stops.

Serious dependence can lead to life-threatening convulsions within eight to 12 hours after the last drink. The delirium tremens (D.T.'s) begins three to four days later, causing the person to become extremely agitated, shake, hallucinate and lose touch with reality.

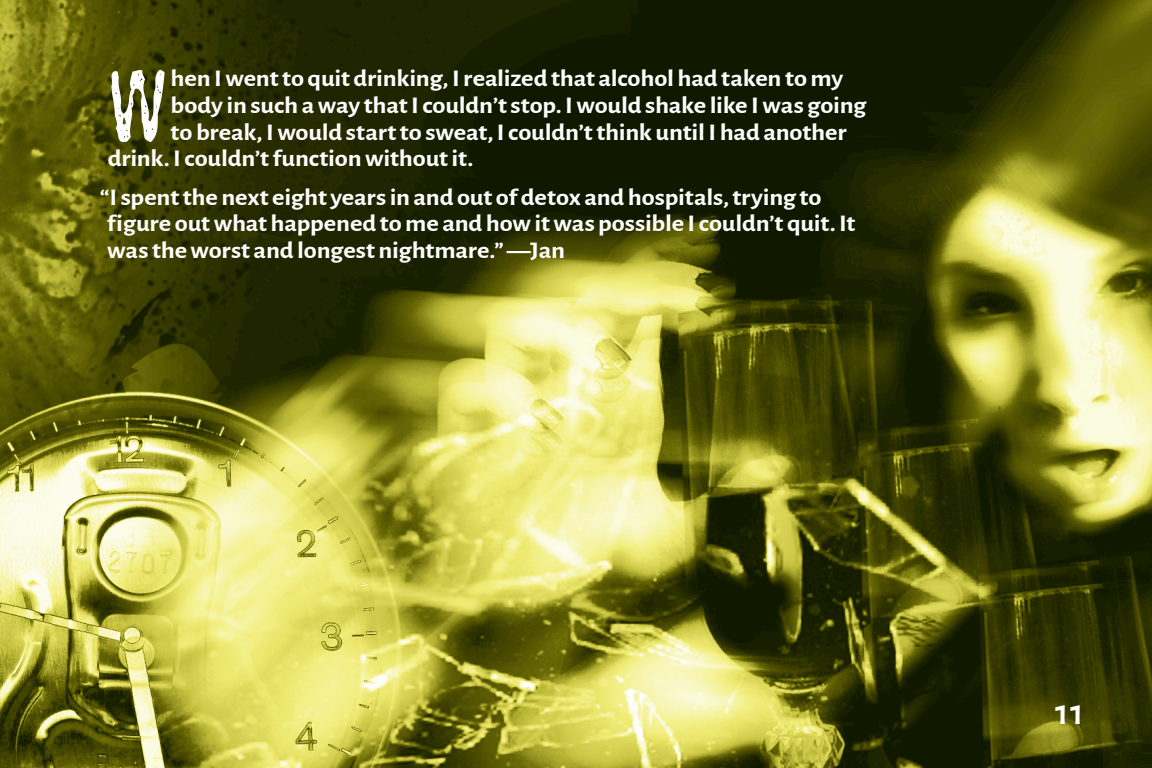
- **Tolerance:** Needing more alcohol to feel the same effect.

Many heavy drinkers believe they can stop whenever they choose to—they just never "choose" to do so. Alcoholism is not a *destination*, but a *progression*, a long road of deterioration where life worsens over time.



When I went to quit drinking, I realized that alcohol had taken to my body in such a way that I couldn't stop. I would shake like I was going to break, I would start to sweat, I couldn't think until I had another drink. I couldn't function without it.

"I spent the next eight years in and out of detox and hospitals, trying to figure out what happened to me and how it was possible I couldn't quit. It was the worst and longest nightmare." —Jan



International Statistics

Every minute of every day, five people die from alcohol consumption. That's 2.6 million deaths every year. Alcohol kills more young people than all other drugs combined. It is a factor in the three leading causes of death among 15- to 24-year-olds: accidents, homicides and suicides.

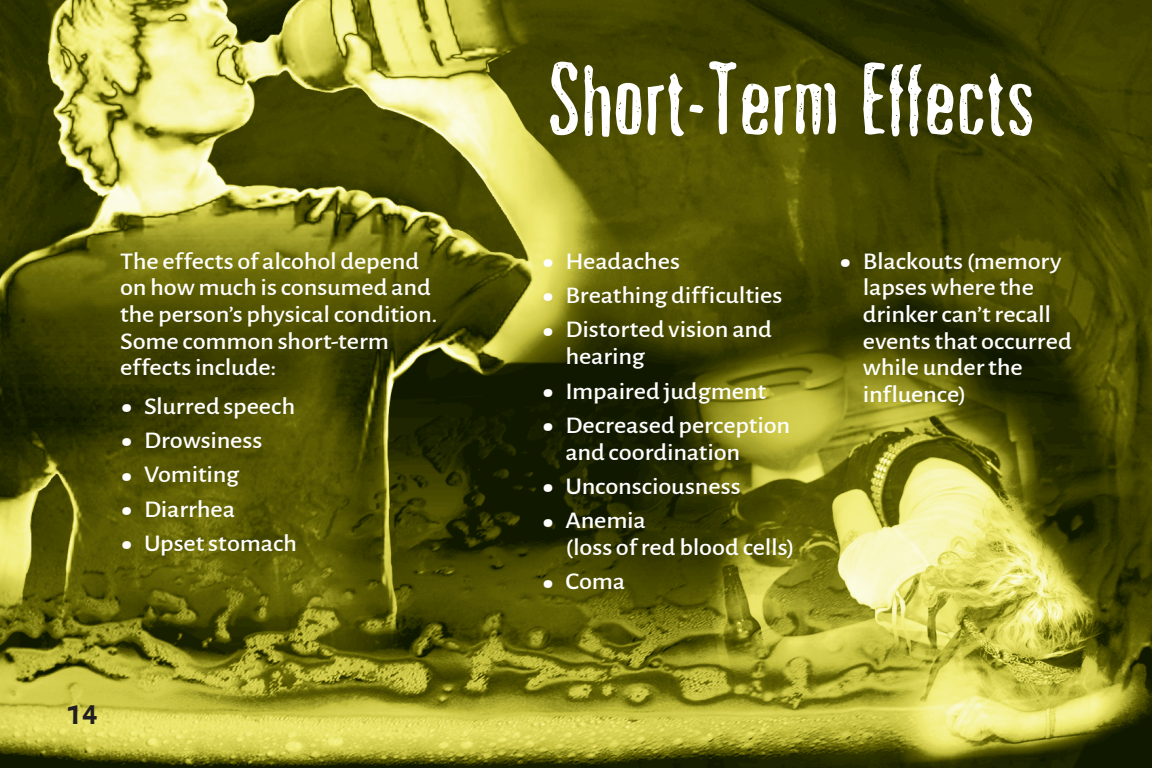
One survey found that 16 percent of heavy drinkers over 12 also abuse illegal drugs.





- Over **1 million** 12- to 17-year-olds report binge drinking in the past month.
- Globally, nearly **a quarter** of all 15- to 19-year-olds are current drinkers.
- **62%** of teenagers have abused alcohol.
- **40%** of violent crimes occur under the influence of alcohol.
- **16%** of heavy drinkers over 12 also abuse illegal drugs.

Short-Term Effects



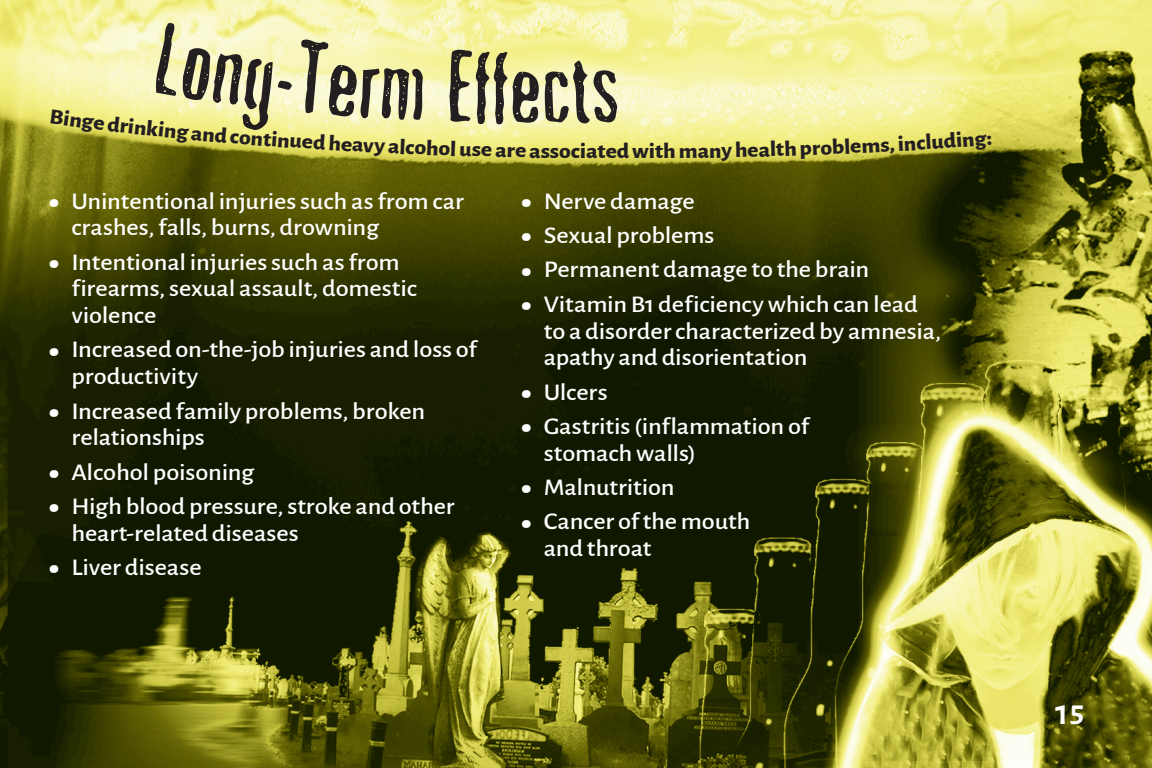
The effects of alcohol depend on how much is consumed and the person's physical condition. Some common short-term effects include:

- Slurred speech
- Drowsiness
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Upset stomach
- Headaches
- Breathing difficulties
- Distorted vision and hearing
- Impaired judgment
- Decreased perception and coordination
- Unconsciousness
- Anemia (loss of red blood cells)
- Coma
- Blackouts (memory lapses where the drinker can't recall events that occurred while under the influence)

Long-Term Effects

Binge drinking and continued heavy alcohol use are associated with many health problems, including:

- Unintentional injuries such as from car crashes, falls, burns, drowning
- Intentional injuries such as from firearms, sexual assault, domestic violence
- Increased on-the-job injuries and loss of productivity
- Increased family problems, broken relationships
- Alcohol poisoning
- High blood pressure, stroke and other heart-related diseases
- Liver disease
- Nerve damage
- Sexual problems
- Permanent damage to the brain
- Vitamin B1 deficiency which can lead to a disorder characterized by amnesia, apathy and disorientation
- Ulcers
- Gastritis (inflammation of stomach walls)
- Malnutrition
- Cancer of the mouth and throat



My addiction built steadily and, before I realized it, I had become a morning as well as an afternoon drinker.

"I decided to stop drinking. I lay awake most of that night and, by noon the next day, every bone in my body ached. In a blind panic, I nervously poured a glass full of gin, my hands shaking so violently that I spilled half the bottle. As I gulped it down, I could feel the agony gradually lessening. Then I finally knew the terrible truth: I was hooked. I couldn't quit."

—Faye

The Youngest Victims

When a pregnant mother drinks, alcohol enters the bloodstream, crosses into surrounding tissue and affects the fetus (unborn child).

Alcohol exposure during pregnancy can result in alcohol-related birth defects including growth deficiencies, facial abnormalities and brain and nervous system damage.



A Trail of Tragedy

Over the past decade, alcohol has claimed the lives of many gifted actors, musicians, writers and athletes. The following are just a few of those lost:

Amy Winehouse was an English singer and songwriter who died at age 27 of alcohol intoxication in July 2011.

Dwayne Haskins, a 24-year-old American football player in the NFL, was killed when he was accidentally struck by a truck while attempting to cross a major highway under the influence of alcohol.

Verne Troyer, known for playing Mini-Me in the Austin Powers movies, was an alcoholic and committed suicide at the age of 49 in 2018.

Dolores O'Riordan, Irish singer and lead of The Cranberries, drowned in her bathtub at 46 years old while intoxicated.

Steve Clark, guitarist for Def Leppard, was a heavy drinker. He died in 1991 at his London home of a lethal combination of alcohol and drugs.

Brian Connolly, Scottish rock vocalist for Sweet, left the band in 1978 due to his drinking problem. He reunited years later, but died of liver failure in 1997.

Mickey Mantle, a 20-time all-star baseball player who spent his entire career with the New York Yankees, required a liver transplant due to alcohol abuse. He died in 1995, aged 63.

Alcohol:

Humans have been making alcohol for thousands of years. Fermented beverages existed in ancient Egyptian civilization, and there is evidence of an early alcoholic drink in China from around 7000 B.C. In India, an alcoholic beverage called *sura*, distilled from rice, was in use between 3000 and 2000 B.C.

The Babylonians worshipped a wine goddess as early as 2700 B.C. In Greece, one of the first alcoholic beverages to gain popularity was mead, a fermented drink made from honey and water. Greek literature is full of warnings against excessive drinking.

Several Native American civilizations developed alcoholic beverages in pre-Columbian* times. Various fermented beverages in South America were created from corn, grapes and other native fruits.

Fermented beverages in early Egyptian civilization

* pre-Columbian: before the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492

A Short History

In the 16th century, alcohol (called *spirits*) was mainly used for medicinal† purposes. At the beginning of the 18th century, the British Parliament passed a law encouraging the use of grain for distilling spirits.

In 18th-century Britain, gin consumption reached 18 million gallons and alcoholism became widespread.

The 19th century brought a change in attitudes and the temperance movement began, promoting the moderate use of alcohol—which ultimately became a push for total prohibition.

In 1920, the US passed a law prohibiting the manufacture, sale, import and export of intoxicating liquors, ushering in an era known as Prohibition. During this time, the illegal alcohol trade flourished until the law was repealed in 1933.

Today, an estimated 29 million Americans suffer from alcoholism, and over 30 percent of all car accident deaths in the US involve alcohol.



† medicinal: something used for the treatment of illness or injury

The Truth About Drugs

Drugs are essentially poisons. The amount taken determines the effect.

A small amount acts as a stimulant (speeds you up). A greater amount acts as a sedative (slows you down). An even larger amount poisons and can kill.

This is true of any drug. Only the amount needed to achieve the effect differs.

But many drugs have another liability: they directly affect the mind. They can distort the user's perception of what is happening around him or her. As a result, the person's actions may be odd, irrational, inappropriate and even destructive.

Drugs block off all sensations, the desirable ones along with the undesirable. So, while providing short-term help in the relief of pain, they also wipe out ability and alertness and muddy one's thinking.

Medicines are drugs that are intended to speed up, slow down or change something about the way your body is working to try to make it work better. Sometimes they are necessary. But they are still drugs: they act as stimulants or sedatives, and too much can kill you. So if you do not use medicines as they are supposed to be used, they can be as dangerous as illegal drugs.

The real answer is to get the facts and to not take drugs in the first place.



WHY DO PEOPLE TAKE DRUGS?

People take drugs because they want to change something in their lives.

Here are some of the reasons young people have given for taking drugs:

- To fit in
- To escape or relax
- To relieve boredom
- To seem grown-up
- To rebel
- To experiment

They think drugs are a solution. But eventually, drugs become the problem.

Difficult as it may be to face one's problems, the consequences of drug use are always worse than the problem one is trying to solve with them. The real answer is to get the facts and to not take drugs in the first place.



Millions of copies of booklets such as this have been distributed to people around the world in over 20 languages.



As new drugs appear on the streets and more information about their effects becomes known, existing booklets are updated and new ones created.

The booklets are published by the Foundation for a Drug-Free World, a nonprofit public benefit organization headquartered in Los Angeles, California.

The foundation provides educational materials, advice and coordination for its international drug prevention network. It works with youth, parents, educators, volunteer organizations and government agencies—anyone with an interest in helping people lead lives free from drug abuse.

REFERENCES:

For the references used to compile this booklet, go to DrugFreeWorld.org/refs.

PHOTO CREDITS: pages 3, 4, 7, 19: Stockxpert; page 5: Bigstockphoto (car wreck); page 9: Nightwatching (feet); page 14: Stockxpert (left), iStockphoto (right); page 17: Lisa Grissinger (weeping angel); page 18: GoddessGift (Goddess Siduri)

FACTS YOU NEED TO KNOW

This booklet is one in a series of publications that covers the facts about marijuana, alcohol, fentanyl, synthetic drugs, Ecstasy, cocaine, crack cocaine, crystal meth and methamphetamine, inhalants, heroin, LSD and prescription drug abuse. Armed with this information, the reader can make the decision to live a drug-free life.

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