



Christine Fieldhouse

Does your teen have a drink problem? If so, act now, advises our expert

When my friend confided her 16 year old gets drunk with his college mates, I smiled to myself, thinking what fun it must be to be so young and not have a care in the world. But her expression told another story, and I quickly realised things had changed since the boys I knew sneaked into the pub for an underage pint.

Like many young people today, her son goes out with the aim of getting paralytically drunk, which he is able to do with no difficulty. His mum and older brother scour the town looking for him in the early hours. They have found him slumped unconscious in churchyards and in the road, his mobile phone and money stolen.

My friend has tried groundings, warnings, punishments, pleadings, she's even filmed her son when he's drunk and shown him the results, but nothing has had any effect. Understandably, she is now sick with worry about what he is doing to his health. And sadly, she's right to be. Sue Allchurch, addiction therapist at the Lynwode centres for the treatment of alcoholism, has seen the harrowing effects of excessive teenage drinking at first hand.

"There are now teenagers dying of cirrhosis of the liver," she says. "At 16 their bodies aren't fully formed, and the liver is at increased risk of damage from alcohol up to the age of 22. Teenagers think liver cirrhosis can't happen to them – but they're wrong, and it's a horrible way to die."

Recent Health Service reports have

revealed that every day 15 boys and girls under the age of 16 drink themselves into A&E wards, and all the experts agree that the problem is worsening at an alarming rate. "It's always been the case that teenagers sneak off behind the bike sheds and sample alcohol, but today's kids seem to see it as their only source of fun," says Allchurch. "They are doing it because others are doing it, and it has become the norm to drink to oblivion. And it's not just their health they're jeopardising. When they're in this state, they don't spot danger. They can't cross the road. They end up in trouble or getting beaten up."

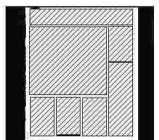
Professor Roger Williams, clinical director of The London Clinic Liver Centre, agrees. "There has been a particular increase in binge drinking over the last year or two," he says.

"The extension of the licensing laws has made alcohol more easily available, supermarkets don't check the age of the buyer as strictly as they should, and every corner shop seems to sell drink. There is more advertising, and fashionable drinks such as alcopops are stronger than traditional beers and lagers. And what's more, the earlier people start drinking, the more likely they are to be heavy drinkers later in life. From the present figures, I expect to see a big increase in the number of young people in their twenties with cirrhosis of the liver in about 10 years' time. And make no mistake, it's a dreadful disease. It is irreversible and results in coma, jaundice and bleeding."

So how can we parents talk some sense into our children? "Teenagers don't have that bell that rings and says: 'Stop!'," says Georgia Foster, a clinical psychologist and author of *The Drink Less Mind* (Able Publishing, £17.99). "Their parents have to do it for them. They should talk to other parents about the peer group's drinking habits, and find out who the ringleader is. But there's more to it than that. If they look closely, parents will find that alcohol is giving their child something they don't have, such as self-confidence or self-esteem. And that's an issue that can usually be addressed. If children are actively involved in a sport, or if they have an interest such as music, or a goal, they are less likely to want to drink to oblivion."

Foster also believes that schools should do more to educate children about the dangers of alcohol. But until that happens, she suggests parents resort to shock tactics themselves. "There is some powerful stuff on the internet about cirrhosis of the liver," she says. "It could well pull our teenagers up short. And I wish some of these kids could see a patient I have in at the moment. She has destroyed her body through alcohol, she is bright yellow with jaundice and she won't live." ❶

For *The Drink Less Mind*, visit www.georgiafoster.com or see *Bookshop*, page 83. For addiction centres, visit www.lynwodemanoor.co.uk.



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