



Alcohol after brain injury: tips for families, friends and carers

Headway's publications are all available to freely download from the [information library](#) on the charity's website, while individuals and families can request hard copies of the booklets via the [helpline](#).

Please help us to continue to provide free information to people affected by brain injury by making a donation at www.headway.org.uk/donate. Thank you.

Introduction

Sustaining a brain injury can reduce a survivor's tolerance to alcohol, so that many survivors find that drinking alcohol affects them much faster than it did before their injury. Further, effects of the brain injury such as memory problems, behavioural problems and fatigue can be worsened after drinking alcohol. For these reasons, many survivors choose to stop drinking alcohol altogether after their injury or cut down on the amount that they drink. Others may, however, continue to drink regularly and fail to recognise the impact that alcohol now has on them. As a family member, friend or carer, this might leave you feeling concerned for their health, safety and welfare.

This factsheet has been written to offer you some tips on how to help a brain injury survivor who is continuing to drink alcohol regularly after their injury. A factsheet for survivors themselves, entitled *Alcohol after brain injury* is also available on the Headway website at www.headway.org.uk/information-library.

Tips for helping brain injury survivors with regular alcohol use

Try to understand why the survivor drinks alcohol

- Some survivors may drink alcohol as a coping mechanism due to its temporary relaxing effect. Indeed, some survivors say that it helps them to temporarily forget about their injury. If the survivor is using alcohol for these reasons, encourage them to get professional support. You could also remind the survivor that the effect of drinking alcohol isn't just temporary, and also potentially more harmful in the long-run, as long-term use of alcohol can worsen some mood disorders such as depression and anxiety.
- The survivor might feel socially pressured to drink if people around them are drinking. If this is the case, remind them that it is okay not to drink, and consider asking some of their closer friends to reduce their own alcohol intake. Remind the survivor as well that it is very common for people to give up drinking after brain injury.



Communicate effectively with the survivor

- Communicate with the survivor when you are both feeling relaxed and have time to allow a discussion to take place.
- Communication problems after brain injury might make it difficult to have a discussion with the survivor. For tips on coping with communication problems, see the booklet [Coping with communication problems after brain injury](#).
- Try to avoid using blame language, such as labelling the survivor an 'alcoholic' or saying 'you drink too much', as this can leave people feeling negative. Instead, try to use assertive language, for instance telling the survivor that they can still enjoy themselves without needing to drink.
- If the survivor has problems with managing their anger, see the factsheet [Managing anger: tips for families, friends and carers](#) for information and tips to help with this.
- Lack of insight can mean that some survivors do not recognise how their injury has affected them, and this might make it difficult to talk to them about their drinking behaviour. For information and tips for managing this, see the factsheet [Lack of insight after brain injury](#).
- Don't be afraid to repeat conversations several times over or provide reminders, especially if the survivor has memory problems or information processing issues.

Find alcohol-free versions of drinks

- Spend some time researching and sampling alcohol-free versions of drinks, and turn this into an activity you enjoy together. Nowadays there are a wide range of alcohol-free beers, ciders and wines, as well as 'mocktails', that can be enjoyed as alcohol alternatives.

"My husband has been told no alcohol, so as he is a real ale drinker, we made a pact to still go to country pubs but to just check out alcohol-free ales, and to become connoisseurs of the growing alcohol-free ranges that are now appearing from many microbreweries. Won't be quite the same but we hope a bit of fun tasting them."



Seek support

- Research national or local alcohol support services. Some useful organisations are listed at the end of this factsheet. Remember that many of these services have been set up for people with alcohol addiction issues, and may therefore be unsuitable for survivors who only drink on occasion.
- The professional best suited to support a brain injury survivor with the emotional, cognitive, behavioural and psychological effects of brain injury that might be causing the drinking behaviour, is a neuropsychologist. Encourage the survivor to talk to their GP about getting a referral to a neuropsychologist.
- Counselling has also been found to be an effective method of supporting people with alcohol addiction issues, so it might be worth the survivor discussing this option with their GP.
- Seek support from the Headway helpline on 0808 800 2244 or helpline@headway.org.uk (Monday - Friday, 9am - 5pm). The helpline is able to offer information, support and a listening ear to families, friends and carers of brain injury survivors as well as survivors themselves.
- Many of the organisations listed in the *Useful organisations* section offer information and support to families and friends of people with alcohol addiction issues, so you may wish to consider contacting them for general support.

Keep a 'drink diary'

- Encourage the survivor to keep a 'drink diary' and offer to help out with this when you are drinking together. This way you can keep a visual record of how much they drink, and this can help with identifying how much they can tolerate, as well as how drinking alcohol has made them feel. There are several new apps and tools that are designed to help people with tracking how much they drink, which you might wish to explore.

Conclusion

Sustaining a brain injury can reduce a survivor's tolerance to alcohol, but they might continue to drink and consequently experience exacerbated effects or other complications. This can leave you feeling concerned, and it is hoped that some of the tips in this factsheet can help you to approach and discuss this with the survivor.

To further discuss any of the issues in this factsheet, or to get support, contact the

Helpline: 0808 800 2244
Email: helpline@headway.org.uk
Website: www.headway.org.uk



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Useful organisations

Addaction

Tel: 020 7251 5860

Web: www.addaction.org.uk

Adfam

Tel: 020 3817 9410

Web: www.adfam.org.uk

Al-Anon Family Groups

Helpline: 020 7403 0888

Web: www.al-anonuk.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous

Helpline: 0800 9177 650

Email: help@aamail.org

Web: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Drinkaware

Tel: 020 7766 9900

Web: www.drinkaware.co.uk

Email: contact@drinkaware.co.uk

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