

Alcohol awareness week: “As a society, we’re drinking too much alcohol” – Vaughan Gething

To mark the start of Alcohol Awareness Week, the Health Secretary warned that while for many people in Wales alcohol forms some part of their social lives, as with most activities in life drinking too much alcohol carries a degree of risk. Reducing alcohol intake lowers the risk of suffering long-term diseases in later life.

The harm to people’s health can occur from either the repeated risk of acute alcohol-related accidents or from long-term diseases. These could include various cancers, strokes, heart disease, liver disease, and brain damage, which can take up to twenty years to develop despite drinking for years without apparent harm.

In 2017 there were 540 alcohol-related deaths in Wales, an increase of 7.1% on the previous year – a number the Welsh Government is determined to reduce.

There are a number of changes a person can make to reduce the risk of alcohol-related harm. Alcohol Concern Cymru’s website DrinkWiseWales.org.uk contains a variety of tools and tips to help people continue to enjoy alcohol, whilst reducing their risk.

The Welsh Government is also taking action to reduce alcohol consumption by:

- Providing high-quality treatment through basic harm minimisation and other advice; to detoxification, residential care and relapse prevention;
- Putting in place a dedicated helpline – Dan 24/7 is a free and bilingual telephone drugs helpline providing a single point of contact for anyone in Wales wanting further information or help relating to drugs or alcohol. In 2017/18 there were 5,151 calls to DAN 24/7, a 26% increase on 2016/17. Traffic to the website has also increased by 92% during the same timeframe.

This has led to a number of successes:

- The number of individuals admitted to hospital for an alcohol specific condition has fallen by 8.8% over the last 5 years. Hospital admissions for alcohol specific conditions involving young people (under 25) has fallen by 25.5% over the last five years to 953 admissions in 2017-18;
- Hospital admissions for fetuses and new-borns affected by maternal use of, or withdrawal from, alcohol or other drugs of addiction have remained very stable over recent years. There have been 64 admissions for fetuses and new-borns affected by maternal use of, or withdrawal from, alcohol or other drugs of addiction in 2017-18, the lowest in the

last decade.

Earlier this year, the National Assembly approved the Public Health (Minimum Price for Alcohol) (Wales) Act 2018, which provides a legislative basis for addressing the longstanding and specific health concerns around the effects of excess alcohol consumption – to improve and protect the health of the population of Wales.

Speaking at the start of Alcohol Awareness Week, Health Secretary, Vaughan Gething said:

“Alcohol misuse is a major public health issue that affects the well-being of individuals, families and communities. In 2017 – there were 540 alcohol-related deaths in Wales. These deaths will have been devastating to the families and friends of the individuals concerned, but many of these deaths could have been prevented.

“We are firmly committed to tackling the availability of cheap, strong alcohol through the introduction of a minimum unit price for alcohol. But it’s not just heavy drinkers who are affected. Moderate drinkers are also impacting their health and their life expectancy by drinking too many units a week.

“I’m determined to ensure the action we take saves even more lives – but as a society, we must have a much healthier relationship with alcohol. Alcohol Awareness Week is the perfect time for people to stop and think before they take that drink.”