



## About Alcohol

### What is it?

Alcohol is the common name for ethyl alcohol. It's a *Central Nervous System (brain) Depressant* and is one of the most widely used (and abused) drugs in our society. It is produced by the fermentation of fruits, vegetables or grains by yeasts which convert the carbohydrates (sugars) of these plants to ethyl alcohol. Alcoholic drinks consist mainly of various strength mixtures of water and ethyl alcohol.

### Medical Uses

Alcohol is sometimes used as an external local anaesthetic and sterilising agent.

### How does it work?

Alcohol depresses parts of the central nervous system as it slows down some of our brain functions. Various parts of the brain are depressed by alcohol, with all sorts of consequences. For example, when the brain's speech centres' area is affected this produces slurred speech and when the co-ordination centres are depressed this results in loss of balance and limb control.

The strong depressant effect of alcohol lasts for a few hours after drinking, but alcohol also produces a weaker agitation or irritation of the nervous system that lasts much longer. This is the cause of the 'morning after' hangover and shakiness. It's due to the irritation of the nervous system by alcohol drunk many hours before.

This effect often leads heavy drinkers to drink again the next morning, as the very uncomfortable agitation can be temporarily overcome by drinking more alcohol. Thus, a vicious cycle is set in motion which can play a large part in dependent drinking patterns.



## **When do we drink?**

For most people in the western world, drinking is a recreational activity associated with relaxation or social and celebratory events. Much business is also conducted with the aid of alcohol. It is essentially used as an icebreaker. In these circumstances the majority of people manage to drink without incurring any harmful consequences.

It is also used, more perilously, as a way of avoiding unpleasant feelings; eg. to relieve stress and anxiety or feelings of unhappiness. For some individuals, drinking reaches a level which begins to jeopardise their health and welfare. The quantity and pattern of consumption at this point will vary from person to person.