

Stay alert while out drinking

As we head towards the festive season, party-goers are being reminded of the dangers about drinks being potentially spiked and the signs to look out for.

The issue is unfortunately a constant, but with more people heading to restaurants, pubs and clubs for any Christmas parties, there are fears more people could be targeted.

The Office of Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) have produced updated advice and information about drug spiking on the national drug and alcohol resource, Frank.

What does spiking mean?

To spike a drink means to put alcohol or drugs into someone's drink without their knowledge or permission. This might be with the intention to incapacitate someone enough to rob or even sexually assault them. Although sometimes spiking can be intended as a joke, it's a very bad joke that is both dangerous and illegal.

There is also some concern at the possibility that people are being 'spiked' by needles/syringes containing drugs. Although this is much less likely than drink spiking, a lot of the advice for staying safe from spiking a drink can also protect you from the possibility of needle spiking too. Spiking is a criminal offence and whilst all venues should be taking steps to ensure they are safe places to be, you may still need to protect yourself, particularly if you feel at risk or you're in a place that is unfamiliar.

How to stay safe

- Plan your night out, including your journey there and back.
- Make sure the venue you are going to is licensed – venues are required to take steps to ensure the safety of their customers.

- When going to a pub, club or party avoid going alone. Friends can look out for one another.
- Be aware of what's going on around you and keep away from situations you don't feel comfortable with.
- Think very carefully about whether you should leave a pub, club or party with someone you've just met.
- Make sure your mobile phone has plenty of charge in it before you leave home and keep your mobile safe and accessible.

How to avoid drink spiking

- Always buy your own drink and watch it being poured.
- Don't accept drinks from strangers
- Never leave your drink unattended while you dance or go to the toilet.
- Don't drink or taste anyone else's drink.
- Throw your drink away if you think it tastes strange or different.

What to do if you think you've been spiked (by drink or needle)

- If you start to feel strange, sick or drunk when you know that you couldn't be drunk, get help from a trusted friend or the venue management.
- If you think you may have been spiked, ask a close friend to get you out of the venue or party as soon as possible and either take you home or to hospital (if seriously unwell). You could also ring a friend, relative or partner and ask them to come and pick you up.
- If you feel unsafe, vulnerable or threatened you can ask for help by approaching venue staff and asking for 'Angela'. This is a coded-phrase that indicates you need help and a trained member of staff will support and assist you. You can also ask for 'Angela' if you are in any situation where you feel threatened or at risk.

- Make sure you can trust the person you ask for help. Don't go anywhere with a stranger or someone you don't know very well.
- Once you are safely home ask someone to stay with you until the effects of the drug have worn off – this might take several hours.
- Don't hesitate to call for medical help if you need it – it's always better to get checked out.
- Remember that males are also vulnerable to having their drinks spiked so don't discount this possibility for yourself or a male friend.
- If you have been sexually assaulted, you can contact a sexual assault referral centre for support.
- Newcastle licensed venues have a Duty of Care policy in place so that staff are aware of how to support vulnerable or intoxicated people on their premises. Venue staff will know how to take appropriate action to keep vulnerable people safe including ensuring they are not left alone or sent home without being in the care of a suitable person.
- Staff at Newcastle venues which are part of the Shout Up! scheme have received specialist training on dealing with sexual harassment and vulnerability and will have procedures and policies in place to appropriately safeguard staff and patrons.

When to phone the police

You should contact the police if you have been assaulted or are the victim of a crime, including being spiked. Share as much information as you can.

Deliberate spiking with a needle is assault and should be reported to the police immediately.

The police will investigate the circumstances appropriately including, where necessary, advising you to go to the Emergency Department to have an assessment and support from a sexual assault referral centre.

When to go to the hospital

- Attend a hospital's emergency department if you have symptoms or signs of toxicity.
- Do not visit an ED if you are well or have mild symptoms that you would expect from any alcohol or other substances that you took by choice.
- The hospital will not routinely check for substances in your blood or urine if you are well, and will not usually collect blood or urine samples for police investigation.
- Deliberate spiking with a needle is assault and should be reported as such. Any required testing or preventive treatment should be determined through that process.
- If you are accidentally spiked with a needle you know or suspect to have been previously used, seek medical advice.

Sexual assault

If you have been sexually assaulted, you can contact a sexual assault referral centre for support.

REACH Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) – 0333 3448283.

Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland (RCTN) – 0800 0352794 (Monday to Thursday, 6pm to 8.30pm, and Friday, 11am to 2pm).

NIDAS ISVA Service – 0191 214 6501.