

Buying a drink for someone in a club or bar should be a fairly innocuous gesture, however the issue of drink spiking has slipped under the radar as an epidemic in Britain. A crime survey by ITV in 2014 showed that one in ten people has had their drink tampered with, and Swansea University claim that one in three of their students have endured the same treatment. Although it is impossible to be sure on the numbers and statistics around drink spiking, it is clearly a huge problem which needs to be dealt with.

Grace was nineteen years old and out in London celebrating with her friends when she was the victim of a drink spiking attack. Her night went from sharing drinks with mates, to drifting in and out of consciousness, covered in blood. This is her story.

Grace arrived at Tiger Tiger in London, already merry off a few drinks and ready for an enjoyable night out. She wriggled through the crowd towards the bar with a group of her friends. The girls ordered their drinks before Grace noticed four men staring at them from a few metres away. The men wandered over and started to make conversation.

“Can I get you a drink?” one of the men asked a few of the girls, who all turned him down and moved away.

The man then turned to Grace, who was slightly more drunk than the rest of her group, and hassled her to accept the beverage.

“Go on, let me get you a drink,” he repeated to Grace.

Before she could think or decline the offer, a straw was placed into the drink and ushered towards her mouth. In a sober state she would usually refuse such an offer from a stranger, but drunk and slightly intimidated, she took a sip, hoping that he would leave her alone afterwards.

The girls quickly moved away from the man and his friends, instead heading over to the main floor and dancing together. It looked as if the night was back on track, and Grace was beginning to have a good time again.

Grace awoke, tired and confused, lying on a cold, damp floor with her friend Jess looking down at her. She looked around, her vision blurred. The bathroom of the club came in and out of focus before she turned, vomited on the floor, and then slipped out of consciousness once more.

Pitch black turned to light again as Grace came to.

“Let’s go get you some food, it’ll make you feel better,” Jess shouted to her friend, with panic etched into her voice.

The two girls left the club and stumbled down the road, with Jess doing her best to keep her friend upright.

“Looks like you slags can’t handle your drink!” a stranger shouted from across the street.

“My friend’s drink was spiked!” Jess yelled back in anger.

The man continued to laugh to himself, making a few comments about the girls’ clothes before striding off into the night without a single thought for their safety.

Once again, Grace slipped out of consciousness.

Darkness.

She woke up inside Burger King, with an employee talking urgently to Jess.

"She can't stay in here, not in that state, I'm sorry."

Darkness again.

"Grace your nose is bleeding!" Jess said, wiping up the blood now streaming from her friends' face.

Darkness.

"Ooh someone's been doing cocaine, tonight haven't they?" a random drunk woman who claimed to be a nurse exclaimed.

Darkness.

"Grace the ambulance is here!"

Darkness.

Grace awoke in a hospital waiting room, unable to remember almost any of the night. A nurse came by to tell her that her pulse was normal.

Two of Jess's friends had arrived to drive them home.

This kind of drink spiking in clubs is not as uncommon as people like to think. It is near impossible to determine how often it happens, simply because it is difficult to distinguish between someone who has genuinely been spiked and someone who has just had one too many.

Dr John Douse works at OGT Forensic Ltd and has been a forensic expert for over a decade. He has particular expertise in alcohol and drug related crimes, including drink spiking.

"It is difficult to ever identify spiking due to the natural variation in flavours of served drinks. Alcohol is likely to be the number one agent used for spiking drinks often in the form of vodka, which can have little or no distinctive taste.

"Any drug can also be used to spike another person's drink, with sedatives likely to be prevalent if control of that person is the desired aim. Therefore, the benzodiazepines have a rich history of use for this purpose."

Within a couple of minutes of our chat, I already get the sense from Dr Douse that clamping down on spiking is not an easy task, but it is something he feels passionately about.

"Spiking is carried out as a prank (for "fun"), for malicious reasons (jealousy), to embarrass or incriminate (drunk driving), or for taking advantage of an individual while intoxicated for a variety of purposes whether it's theft, assault, sexual gratification or even murder.

"Young people especially need to keep themselves safe out there, now more than ever," he warns.

The Guardian conducted a survey of 750 people, across 16 cities to determine how prevalent the issue of drink spiking and date rape was. One in four women interviewed claimed to have had their drink spiked in the past, and according to the survey there were around 30 female victims per week. This was over a decade ago, and still nothing has been done to crunch down on this hidden wave of abuse.

I talked to Grace about her ordeal and how she believes drink spiking should be tackled.

“When the paramedic and a staff member of the club asked who did it I pointed out the man who was putting the straw in my drink and they kicked him out, but the other men he was with were allowed to stay. The main thing that affected me was what little was done by the people in the club and the hospital to help me.”

So maybe this is the crux of the issue. Grace was fine and healthy in the end, and was able to go home, but hat steps were taken by anyone with authority to prevent this kind of thing happening again. The man who Grace herself pointed out was merely told to leave the club. Why was he not detained? Why was he not searched? Why were the police not called?

I contacted Tiger Tiger who declined to comment.

It seems clear that the biggest issue with drink spiking is the lack of taking claims seriously. Police guidelines state that ‘drink spiking is illegal, even if an attack has not been carried out. It can result in a maximum punishment of 10 years in prison for anyone found guilty’. Despite the potential punishment, there doesn’t seem to be any fear or likelihood of being caught.

Grace said: “To prevent this kind of thing I think people should be searched more thoroughly by security, not just doing it quickly to get the job done. I do think more should have been done to punish the guy as he was only asked to leave the club, meaning he could just have easily gone on to the next club and done it to someone else.

“In my opinion he should have been investigated and be banned from clubs and bars in the future. It shocked me how easily he could do it again.”

Since researching this topic, I’ve come across people who doubt the very existence of the problem of drink spiking. Women who have their drinks tampered with often show almost identical symptoms to someone who has simply had one or two too many. This is actually one of the biggest issues we face, as so many attacks slip under the radar, written off as just another boozier who has overdone it again.

To try and prove this theory wrong, I contacted a Facebook group asking for any victims of drink spiking in my nearby town to come forward with their stories. Within a few hours I had multiple women sending private messages about their own experiences and their disgust towards them.

Kylie Louise was 25, and out drinking at a bar in Rochester with her friends. After a couple of glasses of wine, Kylie started to feel strange. She never felt ill off small amounts of alcohol so she knew immediately that something wasn’t right, and proceeded to call herself a taxi.

That was the last thing Kylie remembered of her night.

She woke up on the floor of her hallway, violently shivering. She climbed the stairs, still shaking from the freezing cold, before climbing into bed and drifting back off to sleep.

Kylie woke up hours later, still experiencing these frightening cold flushes. She wandered downstairs to find her glasses on the front doorstep, and her keys still hanging from the lock in the door.

“I live in a dodgy area so I’m very lucky no one took the keys, or came into the house. It could have ended so much worse,” she said.

Emily Wallis was 44 when her drink was spiked. Her name has been changed for the purposes of this story.

Emily was attending an event at a local pub in Rochester where she was also looking after two autistic children. After a couple of glasses of wine, she began to feel dizzy and light headed. She thought she saw a man lurking around her drink, but her vision was blurred and she had lost control.

Her friends put her in a taxi and sent her home.

“I called the police, and they weren’t interested at all. I could have been so much worse,” she said.

These stories are just the tip of the iceberg of a problem we choose to ignore. The fact that clubs and police do very little to follow up of these incidents just throws the issue into a vicious cycle. If police don’t attempt to crack down on it more, then attackers have no fear of being caught and victims have no reason to report it.

I contacted five local clubs to Emma and Kylie in Rochester. Out of the five, only one of them mentioned that they would call the police as part of their protocol in a drink spiking incident. Two refused to comment, and the others explained that they would provide attention to the victim, calling an ambulance if needed.

One club even stated that they would “provide water, free of charge”. This epitomises what little interest is shown in spiking and how seriously clubs take it.

There have been various products launched in the last ten years to prevent your drink from being spiked. Special test strips can be purchased, which will turn a certain colour if a drug is found in your drink. However, this does not combat alcohol spiking which is the most common form of drink tampering.

Bottle caps and drink stoppers can also be bought online which seal the top of your drink. This ensures that no one can slip extra alcohol or drugs into your beverage while you aren’t looking.

Dr John Douse explains that young people out drinking, especially girls, should take care and be as safe as possible in clubs.

“You should always remain in a group of friends who can take care of each other and ensure no one is left behind. One person becoming separated leaves them vulnerable to exploitation if they are inebriated, especially if they become stranded without a way home.

“If someone you know is spiked, then putting them to bed can be a death sentence. This is because the gag reflex is prevented from working, and aspiration of vomit into the lungs can result in death by asphyxiation. Someone must put the victim in the recovery position and sit with them until they wake up.”

It is without a doubt that everyone should be as careful as possible when out drinking, and take every precaution against spiking, however more must be done to proactively combat the problem rather than reacting to it.

Putting the onus on victims to prevent attacks only normalises drink spiking and implies that it is their fault for not being responsible enough. Instead we should be combatting those who are doing the spiking itself, enforcing the laws in place and stamping out this vicious trend once and for all.

Grace, Kylie, and Emily have all had their future nights out soured by the ordeals they endured. It appears that the only people who are truly punished in drink spiking situations are the victims themselves, with no repercussions for the attackers.

Grace said: "Since then, I've been more suspicious of guys in clubs when accepting drinks and I always make sure I'm the one taking it straight from the bar. I also drink a lot less so I'm less likely to be in that situation again."

Although they seem like sensible precautions to take, at what point are the victims sacrificing their own fun and free will to accommodate the risk of being spiked.

Kylie admitted: "I haven't drunk wine since and I hardly drink at all now."

Emily also agreed that she doesn't drink much on nights out anymore, saying that "instead I drink at home mostly, or if I'm only with people I completely trust."

Grace in particular was fortunate that her friend Jess was there to keep her safe, and to fill in the blanks, but not everyone is that lucky, and until Police clamp down on drink spiking innocent victims are going to put in danger time and time again.

Dr John Douse's ten tips to preventing drink spiking:

1. Do not charge up before leaving home on litres of cheaper wine or spirits. This will initially give you a euphoric high and lower your inhibitions, but then unexpectedly "bite you" as your blood alcohol level later rises.
2. Do not mix energy drinks with alcohol in any form especially spirits. These have been shown to cause "false sobriety" encouraging you to drink more.
3. Do not gulp drinks, especially spirits, memory loss can occur at significantly lower alcohol levels than usually required to be achieved by heavy drinking.
4. Do not exceed a modest level of total alcohol consumption especially if you are not a regular drinker.
5. Remember that females, simply due to their physiology, suffer higher blood alcohol levels than males for a set alcohol consumption.
6. Drink as low alcohol drinks as you can, slowly over prolonged periods and intersperse with non-alcoholic drinks.
7. Always witness your drinks served by bar staff, maintain visual control of your drinks at all times, take your drinks wherever you go (including the rest room) and ruthlessly discard any drink left unattended or left out of your sight for any period.
8. Never drink premixed "punches".
9. Stay in control of your behaviour and do not indulge in drinking games.
10. Drink sour bitter tasting cocktails that can only be sipped in small quantities. Sweet luscious tropical flavoured cocktails (described often as "Alcopops") invite rapid consumption due to the pleasure of the flavour and are particularly risky.