

Questions and Answers on Alcohol Consumption

What is alcohol?

Ethyl alcohol, or ethanol, is a psychoactive drug found in beer, wine, and hard liquor. It is produced by the fermentation of yeast, sugars, and starches.

How does alcohol affect a person?

Alcohol affects every organ in the body. It is a central nervous system depressant that is rapidly absorbed from the stomach and small intestine into the bloodstream. Alcohol is metabolized in the liver by enzymes; however, the liver can only metabolize a small amount of alcohol at a time, leaving the excess alcohol to circulate throughout the body. The intensity of the effect of alcohol on the body is directly related to the amount consumed.

Why do some people react differently to alcohol than others?

Individual reactions to alcohol vary, and are influenced by many factors, including but not limited to:

- Age
- Gender
- Race or ethnicity
- Physical condition (weight, fitness level, etc.)
- Amount of food consumed before drinking
- How quickly the alcohol was consumed
- Use of drugs or prescription medicines
- Family history of alcohol problems

What is a standard drink in the United States?

A standard drink is equal to 13.7 g of pure alcohol or:

- Twelve ounces of beer
- Eight ounces of malt liquor
- Five ounces of wine
- A "shot" (1.5 oz) of 80-proof distilled spirits or liquor (gin, rum, vodka, whiskey, etc.)

Is beer or wine safer to drink than liquor?

No. One 12 oz beer has about the same amount of alcohol as one 5 oz glass of wine, or 1.5 oz shot of liquor. It is the amount of ethanol consumed that affects a person most, not the type of alcoholic drink.

What does moderate drinking mean?

There is no one definition of moderate drinking, but generally the term is used to describe low-risk or responsible drinking. According to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*¹, drinking in moderation is defined as having no more than one drink per day for women and no more than two drinks per day for men. This definition is referring to the amount consumed on any single day and is not intended as an average over several days.

Is it safe to drink alcohol and drive?

No, alcohol use slows reaction time and impairs judgment and coordination, all skills needed to drive a car safely.² The more alcohol consumed, the greater the impairment.

What does it mean to be above the legal limit* for drinking?

The legal limit for drinking is the alcohol level above which an individual is subject to legal penalties (e.g., arrest or loss of a driver's license).

- Legal limits are measured using either a blood alcohol test or a breathalyzer.
- Legal limits are typically defined by state law, and may vary based on individual characteristics such as age and occupation.

All states in the United States have adopted 0.08% (80 mg/dl) as the legal limit for operating a motor vehicle for drivers aged 21 years or older. However, drivers under age 21 years are not allowed to operate a motor vehicle with any level of alcohol in their system.

*Legal limits do not define a level below which it is safe to operate a vehicle or engage in some other activity. Impairment due to alcohol use begins to occur at levels well below the legal limit.

How do I know if it's okay to drink?

The current *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*¹ recommend that if you choose to drink alcoholic beverages, you do not exceed one drink per day for women and two drinks per day for men. These guidelines also specify that there are some people who should not drink alcoholic beverages at all, including:

- Children and adolescents
- Individuals of any age who cannot restrict their drinking to moderate levels

- Women who may become pregnant or who are pregnant
- Individuals who plan to drive, operate machinery, or take part in other activities that requires attention, skill, or coordination
- Individuals taking prescription or over-the-counter medications that can interact with alcohol
- Individuals with specific medical conditions
- Persons recovering from alcoholism

What do you mean by heavy drinking?

For men, heavy drinking is typically defined as consuming an average of more than two drinks per day. For women, heavy drinking is typically defined as consuming an average of more than one drink per day.

What is binge drinking?

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism binge drinking is defined as a pattern of alcohol consumption that brings the blood alcohol concentration (BAC) level to 0.08% or above. This pattern of drinking usually corresponds to more than four drinks on a single occasion for men or more than three drinks on a single occasion for women, generally within about 2 hours.³

What is the difference between alcoholism and alcohol abuse?

Alcoholism or alcohol dependence is a diagnosable disease characterized by several factors including a strong craving for alcohol, continued use despite harm or personal injury, the inability to limit drinking, physical illness when drinking stops, and the need to increase the amount drunk in order to feel the effects.⁴

Alcohol abuse is a pattern of drinking that results in harm to one's health, interpersonal relationships or ability to work. Certain manifestations of alcohol abuse include failure to fulfill responsibilities at work, school or home; drinking in dangerous situations such as while driving; legal problems associated with alcohol use and continued drinking despite problems that are caused or worsened by drinking. Alcohol abuse can lead to alcohol dependence.⁴

What does it mean to get drunk?

"Getting drunk" or intoxicated is the result of consuming excessive amounts of alcohol. Binge drinking typically results in acute intoxication.

Alcohol intoxication can be detrimental to health for a variety of reasons, including, but not limited to:

- Impaired brain function resulting in poor judgment, reduced reaction time, loss of balance and motor skills, and/or slurred speech
- Dilation of blood vessels causing a feeling of warmth, but resulting in rapid loss of body heat
- Increased risk of certain cancers, stroke, and liver diseases such as, cirrhosis particularly when excessive amounts of alcohol are consumed over extended periods of time
- Damage to a developing fetus if consumed by pregnant women⁵
- Increased risk of motor-vehicle traffic crashes, violence and other injuries
- Coma and death can occur if alcohol is consumed rapidly and in large amounts due to depression of the central nervous system

How do I know if I have a drinking problem?

Drinking is a problem if it causes trouble in your relationships, in school, in social activities, or in how you think and feel. If you are concerned that either you or someone in your family might have a drinking problem, consult your personal physician.

What can I do if I or someone I know has a drinking problem?

Consult your personal physician if you feel you or someone you know has a drinking problem. Other resources include the National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral Routing Service. This service can provide you with information about treatment programs in your local community and allow you to speak with someone about alcohol problems.⁶

What health problems are associated with excessive alcohol use?

Excessive drinking both in the form of heavy drinking or binge drinking, is associated with numerous health problems, including but not limited to:

- Chronic diseases such as liver cirrhosis (damage to liver cells), pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas), various cancers, including liver, mouth, throat, larynx (the voice box), and esophagus, high blood pressure, and psychological disorders
- Unintentional injuries such as motor-vehicle traffic crashes, falls, drowning, burns and firearm injuries
- Violence such as child maltreatment, homicide and suicide increase
- Harm to a developing fetus if a woman drinks while pregnant
- Alcohol abuse or dependence

I'm young, is drinking bad for my health?

Yes, studies have shown that alcohol use by youth and young adults increases the risk of both fatal and nonfatal injuries.^{7,8,9} Research has also shown that youth who use alcohol before age 15 are four times more likely to become alcohol dependent than adults who begin drinking at age

21.¹⁰ Other consequences of youth alcohol use include increased risky sexual behaviors, poor school performance, and increased risk of suicide and homicide.^{11,12}

Is it okay to drink when pregnant?

No, there is no safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy. Women who are pregnant or plan on becoming pregnant should refrain from drinking alcohol.¹³ Several conditions including Fetal Alcohol Syndrome have been linked to alcohol use during pregnancy. Women of child bearing age should also avoid binge drinking to reduce the risk of unintended pregnancy and potential exposure of a developing fetus to alcohol.

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