Alcohol, FAQ & Answers

WHAT IS ALCOHOL?

Ethyl alcohol, or ethanol, affects mood or behavior (*psychoactive*). It is a drug found in beer, wine, and hard liquor. Hard liquor is whiskey, vodka, gin, etc. Alcohol is produced by the fermentation of yeast, sugars, and starches.

WHAT DOES ALCOHOL DO TO THE BODY?

- Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant.
- It is rapidly absorbed from the stomach and small intestine. It passes into the bloodstream. It is then widely distributed throughout the body.
- Harmful effects of alcohol, can include:
  - Impaired judgment.
  - Reduced reaction time.
  - Slurred speech.
  - Difficulty walking.
- The effects of alcohol on the body are directly related to the amount consumed.
  - In small amounts, alcohol can have a relaxing effect.
  - When consumed rapidly and in large amounts, alcohol can also result in coma and death.
- Alcohol can interact with a number of prescription and non-prescription medications in ways that can intensify the effect of alcohol, of the medications themselves, or both.
- Alcohol use by pregnant women can cause serious damage to the developing fetus.

WHAT IS A STANDARD DRINK?

A standard drink is one 12 ounce beer, one 5 ounce glass of wine, or one 1.5 ounce shot of distilled spirits. Each of these drinks contains about half an ounce of alcohol.

IS BEER OR WINE SAFER TO DRINK THAN HARD LIQUOR?

No. One 12 ounce beer has about the same amount of alcohol as one 5 ounce glass of wine, or one 1.5 ounce shot of liquor.

WHAT IS MODERATE DRINKING?

Based on current U.S. Government dietary guidelines, moderate drinking for women is defined as an average of 1 drink or less per day. Moderate drinking for men is defined as an average of 2 drinks or less per day.

WHAT IS HEAVY DRINKING?

Heavy drinking is consuming alcohol in excess of 1 drink per day on average for women and greater than 2 drinks per day on average for men.

WHAT IS BINGE DRINKING?

Binge drinking is generally defined as having 5 or more drinks on one occasion. One occasion means in a row or within a short period of time. However, among women, binge drinking is often defined as having 4 or more drinks on one occasion. This lower cut-point is used for women because women are generally of smaller stature than men.

WHAT IS ALCOHOLISM?

Alcoholism is a primary, long lasting (*chronic*) disease with inherited (*genetic*) tendencies. Alcoholism has psychological and social (*psychosocial*), and environmental factors influencing its development and signs and symptoms. The disease often becomes more severe (*progressive*) and eventually fatal. It is characterized by continuous or periodic:

- Lack of control over drinking.
- Fixation with the drug alcohol.
- Use of alcohol despite harmful consequences.
- Distortions in thinking, including denial.

WHAT IS ALCOHOL ABUSE?

Alcohol abuse is characterized by recurrent alcohol-related problems, including problems with relationships, job performance, or both; the use of alcohol in hazardous situations (e.g., while driving a car); or some combination of these.

WHY ARE SOME PEOPLE MORE SENSITIVE TO ALCOHOL THAN OTHERS?

Individual reactions to alcohol can vary greatly, and may be influenced by many factors, including:

- Age.
- Gender.
- Race.
- A specific origin or culture (*Ethnicity*).
- Physical condition.
- The amount of food eaten before drinking.
- The use of drugs or medicines.
- Family history of alcohol problems.
- Many other factors as well.
- Therefore, while drinking guidelines and definitions of drinking patterns can be very helpful in identifying risky patterns of alcohol use, personal decisions about whether to drink, and if so, when and how much, should take into account these individual factors as well.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO DRINK TOO MUCH?

- A person may be said to be “drinking too much” or engaging in “excessive drinking” if they exceed the guidelines for average or daily alcohol consumption.
- Among men, excessive drinking may be defined as more than 4 drinks per day or an average of more than 2 drinks per day over a 7 or 30 day period.
- Among women, excessive drinking may be defined as more than 3 drinks per day or an average of more than 1 drink per day over a 7 or 30 day period.
- Current guidelines state that some individuals (youth under age 21 years, pregnant women, and persons recovering from alcoholism) should not drink at all. Among these people, any alcohol consumption may be too much.
- Anyone who chooses to drink should be aware that individual reactions to alcohol can vary greatly. When unsure about drinking, it is best to consult one's own personal caregiver.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO GET DRUNK?

Drunkenness is the state of being intoxicated by consumption of alcoholic beverages to a degree that mental and physical faculties are noticeably impaired. However, the number of drinks that an individual needs to consume to get drunk varies based on a number of factors. These include: age, gender, physical condition, the amount of food eaten before drinking, and the use of drugs or medicines. Binge drinking typically results in intoxication.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE ABOVE THE LEGAL LIMIT FOR DRINKING?

Legal limits for operating a vehicle are defined by a government agency. Blood or breath tests are used to find out how much alcohol is in your system. If you are found to have more alcohol in your system than is allowed in your region, you will be punished by law. This does not mean it is safe to drive under the legal limit, though.

WHAT ARE COMMON HEALTH EFFECTS OF DRINKING TOO MUCH?

Excessive drinking, including binge and heavy drinking, has numerous *chronic* (long-term) and *acute* (short-term) health effects.

Chronic health consequences of excessive drinking can include:

- Damage to liver cells (*Liver cirrhosis*).
- Inflammation of the pancreas *(Pancreatitis*).
- Various cancers, including:
  - Liver cancer.
  - Mouth cancer.
  - Throat cancer.
  - Voice box (*larynx*) cancer.
  - Esophageal cancer.
- High blood pressure.
- Psychological disorders.
- Sudden (*acute*) health consequences of excessive drinking can include:
  - Alcohol Poisoning and death
  - Motor vehicle injuries
  - Falls
  - Domestic violence
  - Rape
  - Child abuse

HOW DO I KNOW IF IT'S OK TO DRINK?

If you choose to drink alcohol, do so in moderation. Remember that there are some people who should not drink alcohol at all. These people include:

- Children and adolescents.
- People who cannot restrict their drinking to moderate levels.
- Women who may become pregnant or who are pregnant.
- People who plan to drive or operate machinery.
- People taking prescription or over-the-counter medications that can interact with alcohol.

When in doubt, it is always best to consult one's own personal caregiver.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE A DRINKING PROBLEM?

Drinking is a problem if it causes trouble in:

- Your relationships.
- School.
- Social activities.
- 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 caregivers. There are many resources available to assist people with drinking problems.

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