

A TOAST TO YOUR HEALTH

Alcohol



When thinking about alcohol, it would not be surprising to have a variety of thoughts come to mind quickly. These thoughts, questions, and assumptions are quite common among many people, so it will be helpful to review these briefly and check out what some of the facts are.

- Everyone is using it.
- It's no big deal.
- Alcohol cannot harm you.
- It's legal, so what's the problem?
- It's been around for a long time, so what else is there to learn about it?

While these have some merit, each one also has much more behind it. That is, alcohol is something about which most people "know so much, yet know so little." Since the use of alcohol is so widespread, there is a tendency to think that "everyone" has a good grasp of the facts. Because of the generalized lack of understanding alcohol, and the importance of young adults, in particular, making informed choices, this brief article highlights some key factors and points you in some directions for further consideration.

As a result of reading this brief article, you will hopefully have some new insights, new perspectives, and a new awareness of resources that can further guide your understanding about alcohol. This article will not answer all of your questions – but as you have further questions, it is important to seek out reliable resource information to get them addressed.



FIRST, IS EVERYONE USING ALCOHOL?

No. In fact, on college campuses, there has been a movement toward an increased number of abstainers among traditional-aged college students. While the majority of college students do drink alcohol occasionally, an increasing number of students are choosing not to drink; currently, approximately 30% of college students report that they have not had alcohol in the last month. Whether this is due to the drinking age, health considerations, safety issues, personal preference, or other factors is not known. With the remaining 70% of students, approximately 40% have had 5 or more drinks on an occasion at least once in the last two weeks; the remaining 30% have consumed less.

SECOND, IS IT TRUE THAT ALCOHOL USE IS 'NO BIG DEAL'?

For many people, this can be true. What is important is that each individual make his/her own personal, informed choices about alcohol. For most alcohol users, alcohol can be a complement to their meals or activities. The 'big deal' part comes into play when other factors are involved, such as safety or health issues, legal considerations, or ethical or religious factors. What is important is that, if you choose to use alcohol, you have reviewed a wide range of considerations so that alcohol's use is, in fact, no big deal for you or others around you.

Some examples follow:

- From a safety point of view, it is important to avoid alcohol use when driving, bicycling, operating equipment or using tools, and in other settings where its use may compromise your judgment or reaction time.
- From a health perspective, alcohol use should be carefully monitored (eliminated) if you are taking other medications, sick, pregnant (or suspect you might be pregnant), or need your full complement of health-promoting resources.
- Alcohol should be avoided if you have religious or ethical concerns.
- Legally, alcohol use has numerous laws, ordinances, policies and procedures surrounding it. Foremost for young adults is the fact that the minimum legal age of purchase is 21 in all states. There are legal standards for driving an automobile, as well as public intoxication. Regulations exist about the need for permits to sell or serve alcohol. Many of these will vary from place to place, depending upon jurisdiction, state, circumstances, or other factors. What is important is to stay up-to-date about these.



IS IT TRUE THAT ALCOHOL CANNOT HARM YOU?

Alternatively, is it true that alcohol can be beneficial for your health? If you look at some of the health and safety perspectives cited above, you have some clues about the answer.

Here are some examples of how alcohol can harm you:

- Alcohol is involved in 27% of student attrition
- Alcohol is involved in 55% of student policy violations
- Alcohol is involved in 49% of campus property damage
- Alcohol is involved in 63% of student acquaintance rape
- Alcohol is involved in 23% of student health center contacts
- Alcohol is involved in 33% of reduced academic performance
- Alcohol is involved with about 17,000 highway death each year across the nation
- Approximately 1,700 students die on college campuses each year related to alcohol

Clearly, alcohol can have some negative effects to individuals, including the person using the alcohol as well as their friends, acquaintances, and others around them.

Talking about the legality of alcohol is only part of the issue. For those age 21 and above, alcohol is generally legal, but that does not mean that any kind of use is legal (consider alcohol-impaired driving or purchase by an intoxicated person). And the legal question is only part of the consideration; health, safety, ethical, and other personal factors are vitally important for a fully-informed and responsible choice.

Since alcohol has been around for centuries, what more is there to learn? There is a lot to learn. The federal government, only as recently as the early 1970s, established the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, designed to help orchestrate and fund research about alcohol abuse and the disease of alcoholism. The title of this agency is quite instructive, as it highlights our society's concerns with these two parts of alcohol – abuse and the disease. NIAAA has also promoted studies about the college campus environment, with a focus on an understanding about what has been done and what can be done to make a difference on the campus. NIAAA orchestrated a major research initiative regarding college student drinking, and has issued several reports and provides a helpful website on this (it's www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov); this is a



tremendous resource that can be helpful in understanding how alcohol works on the body. You can also check out various college policies from across the nation, as well as learn ways you can help yourself as well as others.

Another resource that's helpful in understanding many of the facts associated with alcohol is sponsored by the National Clearinghouse on Alcohol and Drug Information (see ncadi.samhsa.gov). This resource contains a wide variety of information that can be helpful in further understanding alcohol's effects on the body, as well as what you can do if you are concerned about someone's alcohol use. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention (www.higheredcenter.org) provides numerous resources, including summaries of studies, web links, summaries of news articles, and much more.

You will find a very helpful resource with a virtual campus, including scenarios and activities with various groups and settings on campus (first-year student residence hall, Greek house, student-athlete group, and judicial policy violators). With Alcohol 101 Plus, the focus is on making safe and responsible decisions; this includes several situations where you can check out the range of response based on different choices, a visual image of alcohol and the brain, as well as the student union that includes a media center. The website's popular virtual bar illustrates effects of various drinks on your body, adjusted based on your gender and weight, how quickly you drink, and what you drink; you can check out the range of blood-alcohol concentrations of others with various genders and weights, to see how their responses differ from yours. Go to www.alcohol101plus.org to check this out.

With each of these resources, what is important is that they provide you with accurate, up-to-date, and helpful information. In a variety of ways, they offer more factual information, much of which is often misunderstood or not well known by the general public. What is important is that you check out this information so that you have the best information available.

HERE ARE SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ABOUT ALCOHOL:

- ***Alcohol use is widespread on campus.*** Most people make responsible decisions most of the time; however, some people occasionally make an irresponsible decision, and other people consistently make an irresponsible decision. What we



hope to promote is that you are consistently making responsible decisions about your use or non-use of alcohol, and that these decisions are low-risk for you and for those around you.

- ***One thing that is central to your decision about alcohol is that it should be your own personal choice.*** This decision should be made by you, and be based upon good information as well as your own personal values.
- ***The decision about alcohol starts with whether or not to drink; then it has to do with the circumstances surrounding alcohol use.*** These circumstances have to do with factors such as whether or not you are driving, whether you have other responsibilities, whether you will have food with it, how much you will be drinking, and more. As noted above, these circumstances include the variety of health, safety, and legal considerations.
- ***With alcohol use, each state has established standards about alcohol consumption, particularly with a drinking age of 21.*** This is important, as the drinking age was established to help save lives due to the disproportionate number of alcohol-related highway deaths by young people. This is now even more important because of research that shows that the brain's development reaches its peak at around age 25, and earlier use can affect personal growth as well as increase the likelihood of addiction or other problems.
- ***For your personal decision, it is important also to think why you drink – that is, what are the purposes that you seek when you use alcohol.*** People drink alcohol for a whole range of reasons; the question is whether these needs can be met in ways other than through alcohol use, and to determine how alcohol use can help or hinder the achievement of these desired ends.
- ***It is also important to know that alcohol affects different individuals in different ways;*** while many of the general effects can be cited, individuals do have different levels of tolerance, different feelings, and different consequences. Thus, it is important to know your own personal limits and make the appropriate decision based on these, rather than upon how alcohol affects others.
- ***The final thought is that most, if not all, of the negative consequences associated with alcohol abuse can be prevented.*** The important challenge is to establish your own standards regarding your decisions well in advance of the time when you are given a choice. Then, follow through on these standards that you established.



Overall, alcohol use is something that can be pleasurable and enjoyed by many people. Due to a variety of factors, some individuals cannot use alcohol without negative side effects, and others have a higher predisposition to addiction. Responsible decisions are an important consideration with alcohol use – and these decisions are best made by you, based on good information, your own values, and your personal aims. That, then, becomes “alcohol responsibility.”

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