



# Q&A

## Drinking and Alcohol

### Why is it important to know the facts about drinking?

Some people say that the best way to learn about drinking is from experience. In other words, try it and find out how much alcohol you can tolerate, what you like about drinking and what you don't.



Sometimes learning from experience isn't a good idea. Yes, you can learn about alcohol by experiencing its effects but this can have negative consequences for you and other people, such as getting drunk and having an argument with a friend or driving under the influence of alcohol.



This website provides factual information so you can learn about alcohol and then make informed decisions. Whether or not you choose to drink, knowing the facts will help you – and people you care about – stay safe. Each person has his or her own reasons for deciding whether or not to drink. It is important to respect the decisions of others.

### Why do some people drink and others choose not to?

People drink for different reasons. They drink because they enjoy it and it's part of their home or social life. Some people drink to deal with painful experiences. Others choose not to drink. This may be because they don't like the taste or the effects of alcohol or because they have had a problem with alcohol in the past.



### What is heavy drinking?

Drinking doesn't have to be harmful. But sometimes it is, especially if you drink a lot. Heavy drinking means you drink too much on one occasion or over a long period of time. Long-term heavy drinking is sometimes called 'chronic alcohol abuse' and can lead to liver, brain and nerve damage as well as alcohol addiction.



Short-term heavy drinking is sometimes called 'acute alcohol abuse'. It is also sometimes referred to as 'binge drinking'. It is linked to alcohol poisoning, violent and non-violent injuries and aggression. Research shows that many of the harmful things that happen when people drink heavily occur when a man or a woman has 5 or more drinks on one occasion.

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# drinkingfacts.ca

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## What are some of the laws around drinking and buying alcohol in Canada?

In Canada, you must be 19 to drink alcohol in all provinces and territories except in Alberta, Manitoba and Québec, where you must be 18.

Provinces and territories prohibit the sale of alcohol before or after a certain time of day. Also it is illegal:

- ▣ to buy alcohol for someone who is under the legal drinking age
- ▣ for a restaurant, bar or store to sell alcohol to someone if they are underage or if they are already drunk
- ▣ to drink alcohol in a public place without a permit



## What is a standard drink?

The following are all standard drinks:

- ▣ a 355 ml (12 ounce) can of 5% beer
- ▣ a 146 ml (5 ounce) glass of 10% to 12% wine
- ▣ 44 ml (1.5 ounce) of 40% hard liquor or spirits



It takes about 90 minutes for your body to absorb and eliminate one standard drink. The exact time depends on:

- ▣ how much you weigh
- ▣ whether you are male or female
- ▣ the strength of your drinks
- ▣ how old you are
- ▣ your drinking history.





# Q&A

## Alcohol and Your Body

### What happens after a person starts drinking?

When you drink, some of the alcohol is absorbed in your stomach. The rest, about 80%, is absorbed in your small intestine. How quickly the alcohol is absorbed depends on the level of the alcohol in the drink and how full your stomach is. A stronger drink, which has more alcohol in it, is absorbed more slowly.



After you start drinking, you will start to feel the physical effects of the alcohol. This is related to the blood alcohol content (BAC). Your BAC goes up when you are drinking alcohol faster than you can eliminate it.



### How does your body process alcohol?

Once alcohol enters your bloodstream it goes to your organs. Your kidney, lungs and liver start to remove it right away. Your kidneys expel 5% in urine. You exhale another 5% in your breath. This is why a roadside breathalyzer test can be used to measure a person's blood alcohol content (BAC). Your liver breaks down the rest of the alcohol, which then leaves your body in urine.



### How does alcohol affect your brain?

When alcohol enters your bloodstream, it quickly reaches your brain. As your blood alcohol content (BAC) increases, different parts of your brain are affected, starting with the cerebral cortex. The cerebral cortex is the outer layer of your brain. It is responsible for thought, mood, reasoning and memory.

Alcohol also affects the cerebellum, the area of the brain that is responsible for movement and balance. This is why people walk off-balance or stagger when they are drunk.



Finally, alcohol affects the medulla. This controls automatic brain functions such as breathing and body temperature. This is why a person who is severely intoxicated often has slow or irregular breathing.

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## **Why are women usually more affected by alcohol than men?**

On average, a male body is about 66% water. A female body is about 55% water. This means the female body has 11% less water for alcohol to dissolve into. When a man and a woman with similar weight and body type drink the same amount of alcohol, the woman will end up with a higher blood alcohol content (BAC).



Many women are more sensitive to alcohol just before they get their period. Men have more of a special stomach acid that breaks down alcohol called ADH (acetaldehyde dehydrogenase).

## **Why is it not a good idea to mix alcohol and other drugs?**

Mixing drugs is dangerous and can be fatal. Since alcohol is a depressant, mixing it with other depressant drugs slows down your central nervous system. This can result in confusion, injury, dehydration, vomiting, reduced breathing and even coma and death.



Using alcohol and stimulant drugs (e.g., caffeine, cocaine, amphetamines) together can make you think you are sober, but you're not. You are still impaired and will be until the alcohol leaves your system.



Another example is the combination of marijuana and alcohol. Using marijuana and alcohol together is more dangerous than using each drug separately. As the driver of a vehicle, if you mix even small amounts of marijuana and alcohol, you are putting yourself and your passengers at risk.

## **Will alcohol help raise your body temperature when you are cold?**

No, it will do the opposite. When alcohol reaches your bloodstream, it causes your small blood vessels to expand. This increases the flow of blood in your body. Although you may feel warm, your body temperature actually drops. This is why it is not a good idea to drink alcohol to "warm up" when you are exposed to cold air or water.





# Q&A Safety

## Why is it important to eat before or while drinking?

When you drink, some of the alcohol is absorbed in your stomach. The rest is absorbed mainly by your small intestines. If you have no solid food in your stomach, the alcohol will pass more easily and quickly into your bloodstream. When you have an empty stomach, all of the alcohol in one standard drink will be in your bloodstream after 30 minutes.



If your stomach is full, the same amount of alcohol will take as long as 90 minutes to get fully into your bloodstream. When you have a full stomach, this gives your brain and other organs more time to process the alcohol.



## Will caffeine or an energy drink sober you up?

Caffeine and other substances found in energy drinks won't reduce the amount of alcohol in your body or the time it takes you to process it. The only thing you can do to sober up is give your body the time it needs to eliminate the alcohol. On average, that means about 90 minutes for each standard drink you had.



## Why do some people choke on their vomit when they pass out drunk?

Alcohol irritates the walls of your stomach. That's why you often vomit when you drink heavily. When your body has a certain blood alcohol content (BAC), the alcohol slows down your gag reflex to the point where it no longer works properly. Instead of being ejected out of your mouth, the vomit stays in your throat, causing you to choke.



## What is the recovery position?

The recovery position is the name of the position used to prevent people from choking on their own vomit. To put someone in the recovery position you:

- ▣ raise the person's arm above their head
- ▣ roll them on their side towards you
- ▣ tilt their head to make sure their airway is open
- ▣ tuck the nearest hand under their cheek to maintain the position of the head

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Keep an eye on them, look for signs of alcohol poisoning and call for help.



## **What happens if you pass out from alcohol poisoning?**

If you fall asleep or pass out, your body continues to absorb the alcohol you drank up to that point. You might need to have your stomach pumped in the hospital. This involves inserting tubes and valves down your esophagus into your stomach. A syringe is used to draw out your stomach's contents and then your stomach is flushed with a saline solution to make sure that nothing is left.



You could also be given a charcoal solution that is piped directly into your stomach. The charcoal neutralizes the alcohol and prevents it from entering the bloodstream.

## **Does alcohol reduce your level of anxiety?**

Although a small amount of alcohol may relieve anxiety in the short-term, over time alcohol will actually increase your anxiety level. Using alcohol to get relief from anxiety is one reason people become dependent on alcohol.



## **How does alcohol tolerance work?**

If you are a regular heavy drinker, your body will eventually develop a tolerance for the effects of alcohol. Tolerance develops because your liver is able to process alcohol more quickly and you also learn to compensate for the effects of alcohol in your body. Tolerance is a sign of potential alcohol dependency and addiction.



## **How does long-term heavy alcohol use affect the liver?**

Your liver is prone to the effects of alcohol. It breaks down alcohol and other toxins into less harmful substances and removes them from your body. Drinking heavily over a long period of time can lead to inflammation of the liver, or 'alcoholic hepatitis'. Effects include nausea, vomiting, fever, loss of appetite, abdominal pain and yellowing of the skin.



70% of people with alcoholic hepatitis develop cirrhosis of the liver. This means that liver tissue is replaced by permanent scar tissue. Eventually the liver stops working.



# Q&A

## Alcohol and Aggression

### Does alcohol cause aggression and violence?

Alcohol is often associated with violent behaviour. Research shows that alcohol does not cause a person to be violent but it does increase the likelihood that a person, especially a man, will turn to violence in certain situations. Sometimes people use alcohol as a way of excusing behaviour they know is wrong. Alcohol is never an excuse for aggression.



### How does alcohol affect your judgment?

Alcohol affects your judgment because it affects your cerebral cortex. The cerebral cortex is the outer layer of your brain responsible for thought and consciousness. When you drink, the alcohol makes it harder to understand and to communicate with other people. It also slows down or 'depresses' your brain functions that help you resolve conflicts peacefully.



### What is 'alcohol myopia'?

The word 'myopia' means being unable to see things when they are far away as clearly as when they are close. Researchers use the phrase 'alcohol myopia' to describe why people tend to focus on what's happening around them 'in the moment' without thinking about the potential consequences of their actions. This helps to explain why people sometimes regret something they said or did when they were drunk.



### How is drinking connected to sexual assault?

Alcohol is often a contributing factor in sexual assault, especially if the victim and attacker don't know each other well. Drinking makes some people less reserved and increases the chance they will be aggressive. An attacker may even buy a victim drinks to make them an easier target.



Some people believe that they are not accountable for their actions when they're drunk. This is wrong. In fact, a person who gets drunk and sexually assaults someone is still legally responsible for their actions. In Canada, they can be charged, tried and convicted of sexual assault.

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## **In the context of sex, what is 'consent' and why is it important?**

People often communicate in ways that are not obvious or direct. This is especially true when it comes to dating and sex. The Criminal Code of Canada states that a person has to freely and knowingly consent to any sexual activity before another person can make a move. If you are with someone and you are not sure if they want to engage in a sexual act, you should wait. This is especially important when you have been drinking because your ability to understand someone's consent will be reduced. You may also be unclear about your own consent to sexual activity when you have been drinking.



## **If a person gets drunk and is sexually assaulted, can they be blamed for their attacker's actions?**

Alcohol affects your ability to notice danger signs and this can put you at risk for sexual assault. If you are sexually assaulted, it is important to know that that you are not responsible for 'causing' your attacker to assault you.

