

Alcohol and sex

Many of us drink alcohol because we feel it gives us confidence in certain situations. But what are the other effects?

How can alcohol affect our relationships?

As well as giving us confidence in certain situations, alcohol can help us to overcome our feelings of social awkwardness.

So it is perhaps inevitable that alcohol is often involved in 'date night' and the sex that might follow, particularly in new relationships.

Despite these perceived advantages, alcohol also can negatively affect our performance in bed, whilst long-term heavy drinking can adversely impact our sexual health.

The relationships between alcohol and sex

Too much alcohol can cloud our judgement, meaning we make decisions that we might later regret, like engaging in unsafe sex.

There is a common perception that alcohol and sex go hand in hand, and it's certainly the case that alcohol is strongly associated with casual sex, where our sexual partner is relatively less familiar to us than in a longer-term relationship.

This association can be at least partly explained by the way that alcohol affects us: it can help us to feel relaxed and experience a loss of inhibition, enabling us to navigate potentially awkward situations like meeting future sexual partners. Of course, too much alcohol can cloud our judgement, meaning we make decisions that we might later regret, like engaging in unsafe sex.

It is also often the case that we expect drinking to enhance the sexual experience. These positive expectations are not always borne out however: one recent study found that drinking on sexual occasions failed to deliver any benefit for the majority of individuals.

Alcohol and consent

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When someone is so drunk they are incapacitated, they cannot legally consent to any sexual activity. Incapacitated doesn't just mean 'unconscious', but can apply too if, for example, the person has been sick from alcohol, is having trouble standing up, is acting very out of character or can't walk properly.

Having sex with someone when they have not explicitly consented, for example because they have consumed a lot of alcohol, can cause mental and physical trauma. If you are drinking and plan to engage in any sexual activity, it's important to ensure all parties are happy, safe and consenting before going ahead.

Alcohol can harm your sex life

Long-term heavy drinking can adversely impact our sexual health.

Small amounts of alcohol are unlikely to negatively impact our sex life, but drinking too much can be problematic, irrespective of gender. As Shakespeare wrote, "...it provokes and unprovokes. It provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance."

Temporary impotence - or 'brewers' droop' - after a bout of drinking is a common problem experienced by men.

Alcohol can limit or prevent ejaculation, and vaginal dryness can be an issue for women due to the dehydrating effects of alcohol.

Longer-term, heavy drinking in men may lead to loss of libido and potency, shrinking of the testes, reduction in the size of the penis, reduced sperm formation, loss of pubic and body hair and, as a complication of cirrhosis, enlargement of the breasts.

For women, continued heavy drinking may result in the failure to ovulate and general menstrual problems, the shrinking of the breasts and sexual organs, and body fat being redistributed into a male pattern.

Sober sex

There will be periods in our lives where we are not drinking alcohol, yet the prospect of sober sex might be daunting for some. For those intending to experience intimacy without the influence of alcohol, here are some tips:

- Try meeting up for your date at a place which doesn't sell alcohol – for example, the local coffee house or the museum, rather than the pub, or perhaps earlier in the day
- Be upfront with your partner about your reasons (whatever they are) for not wanting to drink – see it as a conversation starter
- Be patient with yourself – intimacy without alcohol can be a scary prospect, particularly if you tend to feel uncomfortable naked in front of someone
- Trust your instincts – if you are sober, you will have a clear head and feel more in-tune with your wants and desires, and those of your partner.