

Alcohol and sex

Many of us associate dating and sex with alcohol, often because we feel it gives us confidence. But what are the other effects of drinking, and how can we take on dating and sex without drinking?

Alcohol can help us to overcome our feelings of social awkwardness so it is often involved in dating and the sex that might follow, particularly in new relationships.

Despite these perceived advantages, alcohol also can negatively affect our decision-making and performance in bed, while long-term heavy drinking can negatively impact our sexual health.

The relationship between alcohol and sex

There is a common perception that alcohol and sex go hand in hand. In particular, alcohol is associated with casual sex, where our sexual partner is relatively less familiar to us than in a longer-term relationship.¹

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. Of course, too much alcohol can cloud our judgement, meaning we make decisions that we might later regret, like having unsafe sex.

It is often the case that we expect drinking to enhance our sexual experience. This isn't always the case: one recent study found that drinking didn't improve sex for the majority of people.²

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Alcohol and sexual health

Small amounts of alcohol are unlikely to negatively impact our sex life, but drinking too much can be problematic, whatever your gender. As Shakespeare wrote, "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 ability to get an erection, 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.

Long-term heavy drinking can have a negative impact on our sexual health.

Dating and sex alcohol-free

The idea of sober dating and sex might be daunting for some of us. Here are some tips for having a good time if you decide to drink less or not at all:

- 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 meet 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 have a clear head you will feel more in-tune with your wants and desires, and those of your partner
- It will get better with practice!

www.alcoholchange.org.uk

1 Robyn L. Fielder & Michael P. Carey (2010) Prevalence and Characteristics of Sexual Hookups Among First-Semester Female College Students, *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 36:4, 346-359.

2 Cooper, M.L., O'Hara, R.E. & Martins, J. *AIDS Behav* (2016) 20(Suppl 1): 40.