



Carolinan HealthCare System

The Ultimate Guide to Alcohol Awareness

We asked assistant vice president of behavioral health, Mary Ward, and Stephen Wyatt, DO, director of substance use at Carolinas HealthCare System, for their input on how alcohol affects your mind, body and emotional well-being.

What kind of influence does alcohol have on the developing mind?

The earlier a patient starts drinking regularly, the more significant the negative effect on the brain. Drinking at a young age hurts a person's emotional development, increases the potential for addiction, and slows educational progression. In addition, research shows the earlier in life you begin drinking, the greater the risk you will develop issues with alcohol and other drugs later on.

Why is there an increased risk for addiction among younger people who drink versus someone over the age of 21?

Before 21, the brain is still developing. That automatically puts this age group at a higher risk than those whose brains are fully developed. Since behavioral and social manners are still being learned, getting intoxicated often leads to high-risk behavior.

It is tradition to celebrate by having a drink. What are your thoughts on this?

Many cultures use alcohol in celebrations. The issue is not so much the use of alcohol; it's the amount used. There are numerous ways to celebrate with non-alcoholic beverages or other healthy food and drink options. Particularly if there will be children around, we encourage parents and older adults to lead by example and to plan celebrations that are not centered on the consumption of alcohol.

How can parents/teachers/coaches work together to stop or lessen underage drinking?

Adults should not be afraid to talk about alcohol use and their own experiences. The "I did it and I'm okay; why shouldn't I let my child drink?" examples are opportunities for adults to model a different path for today's youth. Just because an adult drank to excess (and perhaps even while underage) doesn't mean it's a safe practice. We know more now about the impact of alcohol exposure on developing brains, and we should be talking about it with our children and other young people

How do men and women handle alcohol differently?

In general, women have a lower tolerance than men when it comes to drinking. This is because women absorb alcohol more quickly than men, resulting in a higher level of intoxication even if they have had the same amount to drink as men. Even within the same gender, there are variables that impact the speed at which the body metabolizes alcohol. For example, if you have a drink with food, the alcohol is absorbed by your body more slowly than on an empty stomach.

What is considered a “healthy” drinking habit for men? What about for women?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and the United States Department of Agriculture, men should not have more than 14 drinks per week and no more than four drinks at a single sitting. For women, the recommendation is no more than seven drinks a week or three drinks in a single sitting. Standard drink sizes are 12 ounces of beer, five ounces of wine, and one-and-a-half ounces of liquor.

Can you “save up” your drinks during the weekend and drink them all on Saturday night?

You cannot “save up” your drinks. That is not moderate drinking; it’s binge drinking. Excessive drinking puts more pressure on your body to process the alcohol, and in the meantime, all other digestive processes are put on hold.

Why does binge drinking make you do stupid things?

Overconsumption has the potential to negatively affect your behavior. It may, for example, lead to a loss of inhibitions, violent behavior, loss of consciousness and even criminal behavior such as a DWI or an assault charge. When you drink to excess, you are overloading your body with a mood- and mind-altering substance that not only impacts your behavior, but also your health over time. You can develop tolerance, which leads to needing to drink larger amounts to achieve a desired effect.

How does drinking disturb sleep?

Alcohol can make you tired, which is why many people think having a few drinks will actually help them sleep. In reality, alcohol adversely affects the body’s ability to reach or maintain a deep sleep. Even if you fall asleep, it is a poor, restless sleep that does little to provide sleep’s intended benefits.

What happens if you drink while taking other medications, even those as simple as over-the-counter pain medications or cough and cold medications?

Mixing alcohol with certain medications can cause nausea and vomiting, headaches, drowsiness, fainting or loss of coordination. It can also put you at risk for internal bleeding, heart problems and difficulties breathing. Alcohol can also make medication less effective or even useless. It may even make the medication harmful or toxic to your body. Like some medicines, alcohol can make you drowsy or lightheaded. Drinking alcohol while taking medicines can intensify these effects. You may have trouble concentrating or performing mechanical skills. Even small amounts of alcohol can make it dangerous to

drive. Combining alcohol with some medicines can lead to falls and serious injuries, especially among older people.

Why does drinking make you gain weight?

Alcohol is not a diet food. A five-ounce glass of wine has around 150 calories and a 1.5-ounce shot of vodka or 12 ounces of light beer have 100 calories. All these calories are from sugar and carbs. On top of that, people eat about 20 percent more calories when they drink with a meal, possibly because alcohol interferes with your ability to feel full. A night of drinking – even if it's just one too many – not only leaves you vulnerable to food temptation, but may leave you too tired or hung over to exercise the next day. When you're hung over, you're dehydrated and nauseous, which makes you lethargic and more likely to crave unhealthy foods.

Can drinking affect your looks?

Alcohol dehydrates the skin, which can lead to a puffy, bloated face, stretched skin and wrinkles. There are no nutrients in alcohol. In fact, alcohol can have a huge negative impact on your vitamin-A level, which is important in the production of collagen. When you have lower amounts of collagen, you lose elasticity in your skin. Collagen and elasticity are what keep your skin supple, taut and young looking. By drinking in excess, you actually speed up the aging process because you are already losing collagen and elasticity as you age.

How do you know if it's time to get help with your drinking?

- If you begin to drink and can't stop until your body stops you.
- If someone close to you (such as a medical professional, a friend, family member or coworker) mentions a concern about your drinking.
- If you use alcohol to stop shaking or calm your nerves in the morning.
- If the use of a substance is impairing your social well-being, employment, education or health.

How long does it take to get sober?

Recovery from alcoholism is a life-long process, and there is no clear onset or endpoint. Research is pointing to three years as a strong indicator of stability. [Carolinas HealthCare System](#) has several locations and programs to help those who are committed to attaining – and maintaining – sobriety.

What is your advice for people who are embarrassed to admit they have a problem or who are hesitant to get help?

Substance problems can affect anyone. No age, race, economic status or intelligence level protects people from the disease. Help is available and confidential. You do not have to suffer alone. Recovery is possible.

Why should people cut down/eliminate alcohol?

To stay healthier. To be more available to family and friends. Some people do not have the ability to drink moderately. If you have a history of substance use in your family, it may be something for you to consider.

What can I say to someone in recovery?

“Congratulations!” It is a challenging path, but for someone who works on his or her sobriety and maintains it, it is a mark of pride. Recovery is not episodic with a specific “end.” It is a way of living. People recover when they have a strong network of support.

How do I approach someone who I feel needs help?

Be non-judgmental, show sincere concern and be aware there may be underlying mental health problems that should be addressed. Express your concern for their health and point out specific behaviors you have witnessed. Offer to help them connect with professionals and offer support through the process. Be available to listen and do not criticize them or judge their situation.

For more tips on how to approach someone with either a substance use issue or behavioral health condition, visit [Mental Health First Aid](#).