

Think before you drink: Play it safe with alcohol

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

In the U.S., most adults drink alcohol at least occasionally. According to a Gallup Poll, about 67 percent of U.S. adults drink alcohol. Beer tops the list of favorite alcoholic beverages, followed by wine and then liquor.

Moderate drinking — one drink a day for women or anyone older than 65 and two drinks a day for men younger than 65 — is probably safe for most adults, according to the National Library of Medicine. But the word “moderate” is key. If you’re an adult and choose to drink, be aware of how much you’re drinking.

“People need to pay attention to their drinking, because it’s easy to lose count, drink too much and get in trouble,” says Fulton Crews, PhD, director of the Bowles Center for Alcohol Studies at the University of North Carolina. “It’s unhealthy if you drink more than moderate amounts.”

If you have read or listened to news reports in recent years, you might be aware of studies suggesting that drinking alcohol may have health benefits. Studies vary, however, so the rule of moderation still stands.

“We need more research, because alcohol drinking is really common and could have impacts on health we are not aware of,” Crews says, noting that it’s particularly hard to zero in

on the effects of small amounts of alcohol, whereas it’s much easier to establish that very heavy drinking is unhealthy.

Just a single drink increases your chances of falling and getting hurt, Crews says. But with more drinks, you go even farther into the danger zone for getting injured or causing someone else to get injured.

Drinking alcohol too much can increase your risk for a host of problems. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, excessive alcohol use — more than four drinks on a single occasion for men and more than three drinks on a single occasion for women — can raise your risk for injuries, violence, liver diseases, cancer and other illnesses. It can also cause problems at home and at work.

Excessive drinking is responsible for more than 79,000 deaths each year in the United States. Sadly, about 5,000 people younger than 21 die each year in the United States from alcohol-related car crashes, homicides, suicides, alcohol poisoning and other alcohol-related injuries, such as falls, burns and drowning. Alcohol and driving does not mix, so do not drink if you will be operating a vehicle.

Binge drinking is also a common problem in the U.S. While often thought of as just a problem among college students, 70 percent of binge drinking incidents occur among adults



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ages 26 and older, says CDC. Binge drinking, which is associated with many health risks, is a pattern of drinking that raises your blood alcohol concentration to 0.08 grams percent or above. For men, that level is usually reached when consuming five or more drinks in two hours, or for women, four or more drinks in that period.

Certain groups of people should never drink alcohol, such as alcoholics and anyone not of legal drinking age. Among teens, research has shown that alcohol can have a negative effect on growing adolescent brains, as well as make alcoholism more likely later in life.

People on certain medications, those with depression and people with specific medical conditions, including liver and lung disease, also should not drink. Talk to your health provider if you have questions about whether it’s safe for you to drink.



What’s in a serving size? What you drink matters

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, people are often surprised when they learn what really constitutes a “drink.” From country to country, the alcohol content of beers, wines and malt liquors can vary widely. For example, some light beers contain almost as much alcohol as regular beer. Before you pop the cork, figure out how much alcohol your drink contains. In the United States, a standard drink contains about 14 grams of pure alcohol. In general, a drink is defined as a 12-ounce can or bottle of beer, a single wine cooler, a 5-ounce glass of wine, one cocktail or a shot of hard liquor.

Have you ever noticed that alcohol affects some people differently than others? How you react to alcohol varies from person to person and depends on a variety of factors, including your age, gender, race or ethnicity, health status, the amount of food in your stomach, how quickly you drink, your family history and your use of certain medicines.



Pregnancy and drinking don’t mix

Even in small amounts, drinking during pregnancy can cause an array of physical and mental problems called fetal alcohol spectrum disorders. If you’re pregnant, trying to become pregnant or not using birth control, be aware that alcohol can harm your fetus at any stage during your pregnancy.

There is no safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy, but alcohol use appears to do the most harm during the first three months of pregnancy, when you might not be aware that you’re pregnant.



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